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HIGHLAND LASSIES:

OR,

THE ROUA PAS

BY

ERICK MACKENZIE.

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HIGHLAND LASSIES;

OR,

THE ROUA PASS.

CHAPTER I.

ENGLISH SPORTSMEN.

It's no in titles nor in rank,
It's no in wealth like Lon'on Bank,
To purchase peace and rest.

Nae treasures nor pleasures
Could make us happy lang;
The heart ay's the part ay
That makes us right or wrang.—BURNS.

THE English lessee of the shooting of Dreumah had arrived in the Highlands three days ere the 12th of August, accompanied by two friends. It was a shooting which in extent and wildness ranked as one of the best in the Highlands, being inhabited by every prized species, from the high-ranging Ptarmigan to the far-ranging Red Deer, and brought a rent commensurate with the sport it afforded, and with that wealth which only epicurean Englishmen are willing to lavish on this exciting enjoyment.

The wild country around was unmarked by the tread of human foot; the sportsmen and the shepherds tracked their way by nobler signs. There, on the blue horizon, stood the blasted trunks of a pine forest, looking on moonlight nights like a battle-field of gigantic skeletons, or a fearful group of elans,—Ossian's mighty men—arrested by one death stroke in their attitudes of strife. The father mountain of Dreumah—

that is to say, the mountain which based the lodge flat, was so peculiarly peaked that it might have served as a landmark to the Lowlands. The crowning rocks were fantastically heaped one on another like an upraised cross; and probably Saint Columba himself, struck with the similitude, when wandering in this part of the Highlands more than twelve hundred years ago, had given it its name, for since then it has been called Craigchrisht.

The lodge, a small gray stone building, stood on a platform of heather closely surrounded by high mountains, which, in their desolate grandeur, shut it in from outward view: showing in summer but the play of light and shadow on the many-coloured rock, as the glaring sun sent down its rays with fiery fervour, and in winter, only dreary heights sheeted with snow. There appeared to be neither egress from nor approach to it; though there was a track branching from the parliamentary road about a mile to the west, and winding in a zig-zag pass through the mountain chain until it abruptly ceased at this heather-clad opening.

Behind the lodge ran a brawling river, rushing ceaselessly, with many a fall from the glens beyond, towards the large loch of Nightach. On the brink of the stream stood a detached shedding of tarred wood, the habitation of forty dogs and twenty gillies. They were kenneled here, out of hearing of the lodge tenants; English dogs and Highland dependants living together in happy unanimity, enjoying a mingled life of work and ease, and ever ready to start at the bidding of their masters.

Small, indeed, was that little lodge of Dreumah in comparison with the vast territory to which its tenancy gave the sporting right; and marvellous in the eyes of olden folk were the changes of time and fashion which had caused that right, so little valued in their young days, now to bring an income doubled to the laird. The pair silly grouse and the red deer of the hills were now become the props of the rental; their lives being valuable, their comfort was heeded: no ejectments for them! Times were changed. In the days of the olden lairds the wild birds and the beasts belonged to the faithful clansmen and the tenants, and he who ran might shoot. The venison was for the snowy days of winter, when goodly haunches might hang on the rafters of every bothie, and no one was asked to pay for the peats that smoked it, then, or for the heather grass that fattened it. Aye, not a grandfather

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amongst them but might remember those days, and turn to curse the change. The people and the beasts had reigned an equal length of days, from time immemorial; but the beasts were subservient: the people stood next to the laird in those days; they fought and bled for him. In the very, very old days, it was they who kept his lands for him in spite of the Sassenachs; but now, the Sassenachs, who never could have won the land by their blood, could win it by their gold; and the lairds took their gold, and "evicted" their people. The times were indeed changed!

The sitting-room of the lodge was about to be vacated; the three gentlemen had risen from breakfast and were in discussion over their plans for the day. It was a small square room, furnished with rigorous simplicity, and lighted by two curtainless windows at one end; a black hair sofa was drawn along the wall, opposite to the hearth, where a huge turf fire blazed; a heavy table was in the middle, on which lay a pile of newspapers, books, and cigars; wooden arm-chairs of comfortable shapes stood about; and on the side where the door of egress opened were several shelves laden with desks, game cards, quaghs, flasks, etc. On the opposite side were three small doors, half shut, and marked B. No. 1, B. No. 2, B. No. 3, showing them to be occupied as bedrooms. Into one of these Basil Harold, the youngest and tallest man of the Dreumah party, now entered, whistling: he was impatient to get out and be off. It was a room of cell-like proportions, sufficing to contain a chair or two and a large bath, in addition to the long and narrow bed, fixed in a recess of the wall, and curtained. The washing-stand was built into the wall, and supplied with pipes of icy water from a hill spring; a looking-glass, dressing-case, etc., stood on a broad slab of slate which formed the sill of the window; and shelves, reaching from above the pillow to the ceiling, held all the necessaries of a shooting-lodge toilette. All three bedrooms were planned and furnished exactly alike.

Basil Harold dived his hand into the pocket of a superb dressing-gown of wadded satin which hung behind the door, and taking out a cigar-case and a book, transferred them to the pocket of his shooting jacket; then slinging on his shot-belt and powder-flask, he rejoined his friends. He was rather reserved in manner, and grave for his years, which numbered only *six-and-twenty*; but with a certain dreaminess in his *soft blue eyes* and a quiet humorous smile, which struck the

fancy. He had thick brown hair; his feet and hands were rather large, but well shaped, and his mouth indicated birth in the finely curved upper lip: certainly pride and self-control were clearly traceable there; and there was an air about him that interested more than many a classically moulded figure. One could not be long in his society without feeling that honesty of purpose and purity of mind were innate qualities in him. The womanly care which had guarded and guided him until his tenth year, had cultivated good principles never to be exterminated. Gentle, loving, and beloved, as a boy, he had never been cruel or mean-spirited; but, strong and healthy in mind and body, when he went to Eton, he developed a manly spirit, and in self-reliance was inferior to none: he was happy there, and when he left cried "Floreat Etona" with all his heart. On leaving Oxford, he went abroad for a couple of years with his friend Sir Francis Thornton; who quite foresaw the beginning of a bright future for Basil. Harold's hall stood ready for his return to that fine old place, where all the social duties and pleasures of life for him were centred; and with the fresh vigour of unwasted youth, he had already, asking God's blessing, began the happy performance of them.

The other men were seated on opposite sides of the blazing fire when he re-entered. Edward Herbert Auber, who was lighting his cigar at a bit of glowing turf, was a slight-made man of five or six and thirty, with a pale complexion, soft dark eyes, and hair of silky ebon black. His manners were bland and earnest, and he had a smile of variable expression and perfect beauty. A most fascinating companion was Auber. He had travelled, was accomplished, frank, and agreeable; his temper was perfect: no contrary tastes or opinions could embitter his feelings, and the finely modulated tones of his voice powerfully aided his persuasive eloquence. His patience and good-humour were never exhausted; not even when his friend Marchmoram forced him to ascend Stronichie at a goat's pace. He enjoyed life, and had seen it in all its phases; and he knew not only London but the world.

On the moor, Marchmoram's firm and active step was always slightly ahead of his friends, and his quick and energetic voice was decisive, either in animated conversation or in commands to the keepers; who were always more ready to hear and obey his orders than those of either the polished Auber or *good-humoured* Harold; for a man who combines a powerful *frame with force of character*, has a strong influence over all

his inferiors, from menials even to the brute creation. Of Marchmoram's mind we shall know more anon. His face was strong and peculiar; marked with traits of good and evil. His hair was a rich chestnut colour, and of exquisitely fine texture; all women admired it. His eyes were literally the light of his countenance, for when they were cast down in one of his absent moods, darkness came over his expression: their colour was a hawkish brown that deepened almost to blackness with rage, softened with love, and when excited—and he was fearfully excitable—kindled like fire. The flame of life burnt strongly in him, whether openly or subdued. In short, he would have been handsome, but for the mouth, the index of character. It was ugly, and unlovable: the lips were thin, red, and firm, and sometimes drawn down at the corners; smiles sardonic, sarcastic, satanic, and seraphic wreathed them by turns. On the high, wide, and massive brow, intellect sat firm: no bodily fatigue could dull his keen mental energies. His figure was more strongly than finely proportioned; being rather too muscular, but well adapted for the manly exercises of walking, running, rowing, and riding, in all of which he excelled. He had many friends, but had made some enemies. He wanted the studied self-control, the polished forbearance of Auber: where he despised any one he showed it: and this was somewhat often.

Marchmoram had just briefly announced to Auber his intention of not shooting that day, as Harold entered.

"The flat of Bohr'dell does not suit me! I shall walk to the post by-and-by, and bring back a report of the game on Lochandu."

Auber shrugged his shoulders in reply, and walked to the window.

"Well, the grouse have crowed too long for me this morning," exclaimed Harold, seizing his cap, and striding towards the door. "I am off! and, Auber, if you want the scent to keep as it does now, you should be on Stronichie in half-an-hour. Shall I call Ralph?"

"The wind may blow where it listeth for me, my fellow," replied Auber, putting his head out of the window. "I must have another fortnight in this bracing climate before my energies will match yours. If I don't find the stag to-day, I shan't sleep less soundly to-night." But be so kind as to send Thorold here, if you see him."

"Not going out!" exclaimed Marchmoram, as Harold left.

the room. "I would have taken the pass myself, had I known this, Herbert."

"But I am going," Auber replied, with an amused smile, "slow and sure as any Scotchman. Oh, Thorold!" he continued, as a pompous-looking English valet slowly and widely opened the door, "I fancy a sandwich of that spiced beef to-day for lunch. Pray have it put up; and tell Ralph, the red-headed gillie (I always forget their infernal names) ——"

"Oon Maikcen-zee, my lord—sir—I beg your pardon," stuttered the valet.

"Ewen Mackenzie," said Marchmoram, angrily. "Auber, no message can be given distinctly where, as you have seen before, affected blunders are permitted."

The valet gave a huffed bow.

"Ewen Mackenzie, Thorold," Auber repeated, blandly. "Pray tell Ralph to desire Mr. Ewen Mackenzie to meet me at the Bogle Spring, with a hill pony for returning."

"Yes, sir—my lord." And with a stately bow Thorold disappeared.

"I hate that fellow; he is as unsuited to this place as Jacques the French cook," said Marchmoram.

Auber laughed. "Thorold, certainly, is only pleasant in his thorough English comfort: he suits London admirably. Were I to go abroad to-morrow, I would not take him; but it would require all the strength of my conscience to prevent my bribing Harold's Gupini away from him."

"Yes; he would be worth his weight in gold," replied Marchmoram. "That fellow would go neck and neck with his master through any country. Seldom in his life before (or I am much mistaken) has Gupini lived in the ~~of~~ of his present servitude; and there is too much quicksilver in the rascal to make him long content with it. He is a clever fellow; but give me my own honest bull-dog, Greaves—faithful, quiet, and obedient: I require nothing else in a servant."

"No, those are sterling qualities," replied Auber, and humming an oper air, he proceeded to join the gamekeeper, who waited impatiently outside.

Half-an-hour afterwards Marchmoram rose from his chair, muttering, "Pshaw! no more dreams," and glancing at a leather bag hanging above one of the bedroom doors, he took it down, slung it over his shoulder, put a quagh and a small field-glass into his pocket, and sauntered out. When he felt ~~the~~ air strike his face, he turned and took a large plaid of

Mackenzie clan tartan from a table where lay heaps of such like warm wraps, wound it scientifically around him, and started at a brisk pace across the heather behind the lodge; gradually descending until he reached at last one of those capital parliamentary roads which now intersect the wildest and highest grounds of the Highlands. The gray mists, which had lain cowering along the mountains all the morning, gradually rose, until the sun disappeared behind one huge white cloud, which almost obscured the coldly bright azure sky. The scene now wore a strange unearthly light, such as is sometimes seen in a Highland autumn day; there were no shadows and there was no brightness, but every object was clearly and strongly defined, and all idea of distance was destroyed.

The shooting box of Dreumah lay about eight miles from the place to which Marchmoram was bound, but in less than two hours he entered the wild strath of Erickava, where the "Post-office" stood superior midst a "toun" of peat-built hovels, the abodes of the thinned population of all the neighbouring glens. It was a low thatched cottage of two rooms, occupied by Mrs. Jean Fraser, a Lowland woman, the widow of a Highland drover; and as she only received three pounds a year for her official duties, she eked out her means by selling small groceries and delf ware. This combination is almost invariable in the Highland districts: the shop and the post always dwell together. The post-mistress started back from her spinning-wheel, as Marchmoram pushed open the door and asked for the Dreumah letters; for hitherto one of the gillies had daily appeared for them: she courtesied deeply, and proceeded to separate them from a very small heap of others, addressed to the minister and one or two neighbouring lairds' families. Meanwhile the Englishman sat down on a turf seat at the door; and soon a small group of wild-eyed, bare-legged children gathered round, gazing on him with looks of undisguised curiosity and admiration. They were suddenly dispersed by a stout merry-faced girl in a blue linsey-wolsey petticoat and cotton jacket, who approached with a white bowl of rich milk and an oat cake on a platter: nodding and smiling she offered them to Marchmoram, but as he placed a silver token of thanks on the untasted knock, she blushed scarlet, exclaiming, "Och, aneil! aneil!"* He then, throwing the silver to a kilted laddie, took the bag from the post-mistress and arose to return.

* "Oh, mair!"

Instead of retracing his steps, he proceeded by a precipitous path along a barrier of high gray rocks, which bounded the huts and seemed to extend for miles beyond; but a sudden turn brought him to a wide and rugged rent, through which he scrambled. He started back at the glorious grandeur of the scene beneath the height on which he stood. Wherever the eye wandered it met the wildest, the most romantic beauties of Highland scenery. Around on every side rose the empurpled hills, towering sublime in their ancient pride of isolation. A sombre forest swept its massy length to the base of the nearest mountain; and the light now brightening, a golden glow lit up the varied green foliage of weeping birch, lordly pines, and graceful larch. The sunbeams fell on the still waters of a small loch, which lay sparkling at the foot of a rugged black rock, like "beauty in the lap of terror." March moram's eyes seemed to take a brighter colour when first they gazed over the splendid landscape; a flush passed over his brow, and he half whispered—"On my soul, how beautiful!" The next moment, in a clear excited tone, he exclaimed, "By Jove, that must be the Pike Loch!" and bounded downwards over rock, heather holes, and huge trunks of decayed trees, until he stood breathless by its margin.

While gazing on the solitude, he started, with another exclamation of surprise, as a young girl slowly rose from behind a mossy stone, and stood within three feet of him. She was quaintly dressed in a short gray petticoat, with a white muslin jacket edged with blue braiding, the sleeves tucked up to the elbow. She had a long forked stick in her hand, and a dark coloured plaid, strong brogues and coarse stockings, lay at her naked feet, with an osier basket full of exquisite water lilies. A round straw hat hung on one arm, and she slanted it across her eyes to obtain a better view of the stranger; then, with a deep blush, she slid down again, drawing her plaid over her feet and tossing back her long silken hair from off her face.

March moram looked at the maiden for a moment. Her hair seemed transmuted by the sunbeams to molten gold; her eyes were blue—"darkly, brightly, beautifully blue;" the blush had faded, and her complexion was fair and pale. He did not then take time to analyze the expression in her face, but with a cold English bow he asked, "May I ask you the name of this lake?" She smiled, and replied with a charming frankness, and in a sweet voice with a slight Scotch accent: this in the Highlands of Scotland differs totally from that of the Lowlands;

in the former, it is merely accent, and of a low tone, sometimes slightly faltering; in the latter, the phraseology is different, and the accent is shrill and high-pitched.

"I call it Loch Florachin; I forget the local name, but I call it Loch Florachin Bahn,* because these passion-flowers grow on it: I come for them here almost daily, and wade in the water and pull them in with a stick."

"You mistake," said Marchmoram, smiling, "these are water lilies—not passion-flowers, which grow very differently. Is not this a good pike lake?"

"I know there is a different passion-flower, but I have never seen it: these are *my* passion-flowers. Yes, this is a famous 'ike loch; but there is one not far off which is full of ruby red trout and char, only it is difficult to haul."

"Ah! why?"

"Because there are ancient Pictish trees lying beneath, and they tear the nets."

"That's the deuce of all the Highland lochs," muttered Marchmoram.

The girl smiled.

"Why do you smile?"

"At a thought of my own, and because you pronounced loch very well just now: it is affectation to speak of lakes."

"I never thought loch a prettily pronounceable word until a moment ago," said Marchmoram. "Any man of education can, or ought to, pronounce the word, for Hebrew and Gaelic often assimilate. Do you speak Gaelic? You look as if these hills had been your teachers!"

"Yes; I am a Highlander: my foster-mother lives in that shealing. I have left my pony there while I came to gather these flowers; and now I must go for it and ride home ere the gloamin' approaches. There are two rivers to ford ere I get home—there," she added, pointing to a mountain range about five miles off.

"Allow me to fetch your pony."

"Thank you. It may be in the sheep fank behind that peat stack: if you follow that track you will soon reach it."

Scarcely had Marchmoram turned, when she slipped on her shoes and stockings, wrapped her plaid round her waist and shoulders, pulled down her sleeves, pushed on her hat, and swinging her basket to her side, followed and overtook him with the step of a Dian.

* Loch of the white flowers.

"Do not go for my pony; I shall get it for myself. I thank you very much."

And with an abrupt courtesy she passed him.

CHAPTER II.

THE HIGHLAND FOSTER-MOTHER.

"I dreamed I lay where flowers were springing
Gaily in the sunny beam."

"— bring a Scotsman frae his hill,
Clap in his cheek a Highland gill,
An' there's the foe;
He has na thought but how to kill
Twa at a blow."

"But tell me whisky's name in Greek,
I'll tell the reason."—BURNS.

THE young Highland girl stepped quickly up a heather track, until she stopped before a low black cottage, thatched with brown sods. A bleak stone dyke surrounded it, and in some hurdle enclosures a few piteous-looking black-faced sheep were cropping the dry herbage. These enclosures comprised the fank; where, in summer, the wool-clipping was done, and where the cattle sought huddled warmth during the night storms of winter. A few dark pines crowned the huge gray rocks that rose behind the cottage. It was a desolate and eerie-looking spot. A little scrubby-brushed fox ran out, as the young girl stopped at the door, and, jumping at her plaid, clung playfully to the fringe with his teeth; but she shook it off and entered. The earthen-floor of the low-built room was strewn with withered brackens and heather, and the atmosphere was dense with peat smoke. A small black cow and a handsome little thoroughbred pony stood together tethered to a fir post, eating from one coggan full of potatoes; a flock of cocks and hens were roosted on the rafters, and many rude implements of farming, several corn flails amongst them, lay scattered about. Having tightened the saddle girths and loosened the bridle of her pony, the maiden passed into an inner room.

This was the family room. The flooring here also was earthen; there were two small windows, the broken panes of which were being replaced by sheets of mica from the neighbouring

rocky hills. The hearth was built in the centre of the room, and one-half of the smoke escaped by a rent in the roof, the other half swept out into the entrance room. A table stood opposite the window; the bed was built into the wall next it, and hung with woollen-spun curtains. Two wooden shelves, above the patchwork counterpane, contained some strangely brown books, tea and snuff canisters, and an oaken box curiously carved and clasped. A quaint-looking clock hung in one corner, and a low rocking-chair, simply constructed with twined birch twigs, stood by a spinning-wheel opposite the fire. A small dresser, on which some pots and pans and crockery-ware were arranged, had a clothes screen drawn before it. Green branches of birch were loosely laid between the black rafters and ceiling, and a huge pile of fresh fire-wood filled the space from the bed to the opposite wall.

A tall handsome woman of middle age advanced to meet the visitor. She wore a matron mutch, high and white; a tartan scarf, bound across her full wide chest, was fastened with an antique silver brooch thin with age, and scored with many initial traditions of the past. Her petticoat was of dark blue wool, and her stockings of brown moss dye. In appearance she was the very *beau ideal* of a Highland wife. Her face was rather dark-complexioned, and the narrow band of hair visible was a deep-coloured red; her eyes were a clear, cool, hazel, and her nose and mouth were finely formed, but the lips were almost too blood-red. Her hands were small and white, and she had a peculiar way of wringing them as she spoke, drawling her words in that singing tone the Highlanders use in speaking the English tongue.

"Esmé, ma guil,* you'll take a drink;" and she poured milk from a tin flagon into a glass: then, taking down a canister, she poured some whisky from a flask, and added a spoonful of crushed sugar: "Drink to Normal and me."

"To you, darling Florh."

"Weel ah weel! let that be; it 'll na hinder fate."

"You are not to be always making mine, Florh; I won't have it," cried Esmé, throwing back her head with quick scorn, and her eyes darkening dangerously: "I love eagles better than hawks." Then, she asked quietly, "Will you read me a dream?"

"Aye, tell it. Was it dreamed last night?—Last night has a date to it."

* My love.

HIGHLAND LASSIES.

"Yes, my dearest mother," Esmé replied with a sigh. "Florh, listen:—I was awakened from a deep sleep by the wildest hooting of the owls; they seemed all in flight towards the Roua Pass. I sat up in my bed; the blessed moon was resting in splendour on a dark cloud high above the hill, and shedding quivering silver on my pillow. As I gazed on her, I spoke your word, dear Florh—*Roi-Orduchadh*,*—and, ere I list, the cloud burst into fragments, and I counted seven fantastic shadows as they floated across the 'Mother of Visions.' I lay down again, and the rushing of the river soon soothed me to sleep. Florh, I dreamt that my sister Norah and I were lying in our own little boat, which was moored to the trunk of the old cherry-tree, at the garden bank. She was sleeping. A dreamy feeling pervaded the very air; the sun was scarcely shining, but it cast a tremulous light on the silver river, lightening and deepening the shades of the melancholy birches: there was a hush like sleep. A strange mysterious feeling stole over me: not peace, but excitable unrest; not indolence, but abandonment. The silence gradually broke; faint, faint sounds of melody arose; the waters trembled as if the harmony breathed on them. I rose up, and then suddenly I saw shadows—those visionary moon-shadows—come hurrying past! The soft light vanished, and the old mountains looked resplendent in gold and purple glory. Oh, Florh! darkness came on, as the hand of an invisible arm darted through the air and struck the cherry-tree to the earth. The river waves rose in fury; the boat rocked and sunk. My sister and I struggled desperately in the cold and stormy water. She grasped a long honeysuckle tendril that was drooping above us; I saw she was saved, and shrieked 'farewell' to her, as the current swept me on past her—past home—past life and hope—into the gloomy waters of a mist-covered ocean. Then Florh, I awoke!"

When Esmé ceased, her foster-mother stooped, and, raking the hearth-ashes with her finger, picked out a charred bit of pine wood. She crossed her bosom thrice with it, and put it into Esmé's left hand.

"*Mathal voch*! † picture the shapes of the seven clouds to me."

"I cannot do that; but I remember the fourth was a long twisted flake, like that—" And Esmé drew a mark on the hearth-stone with the charcoal.

* *Destiny and fate.*

† *My poor darling.*

"Yes, bairn, it was this; and, with an exultant laugh, her foster-mother turned the hieroglyphic into the Saxon letter *f*. "Now tell me more shapes."

"Well, the first clouds went whirling past in round shapes—so; and I remember the cloud that followed that *f* was serpentine—like this; and the last shadow of all was tailed, like a comet."

"Aye, aye: so and so;" said Florh, and she scrawled the letters *g* and *r* and *y*. "Was the cloud between the two last like this?" and she added an *e*;—Esmé nodded. "Then"—striking the stick against the crook over the fire, it broke in two; Florh snatched at the pieces, and muttering, "Two syllables, and the first of Heaven," drew in legible Saxon characters the name "GODFREY."

When Esmé had entered the cottage, Marchmoram seated himself on a heather clump within sight, and gave himself up to the luxury of day-dreams, carelessly pulling up the heather and nipping off its deep purple bells with his teeth. He was roused by the neigh of a pony, and, looking up, saw his Highland naiad mounted, at the cottage door. The basket of water lilies was poised on her head (as the steadiest way of carrying them), and secured by a strap beneath the chin. This coronal gave a wild grace to her slight figure; the pale flowers, with their cool green and transparent tendrils, softly shadowing her long golden tresses. Her hat was slung to the crupper, and her foster-mother was wrapping the plaid from her shoulder to her knee. Esmé threw her arms around Florh's neck, and, stooping, kissed both her sun-burnt cheeks; then, touching the bridle, she cantered rapidly down the track, past Marchmoram. She saw him not; her eyes were fixed on the glare of the setting sun, above the hill of her dream—the famed Roua Pass.

It was about nine o'clock, and the three English sportsmen were seated round the mahogany table in the lodge of Dreumah, with a luxurious dessert spread before them, of green and purple grapes from English hothouses, golden yellow pine-apples, Chantilly biscuits and spiced compôtes. The dessert service was of rich red Bohemian glass, varied by bottles and glasses of divers shapes and colours; bright champagne sparkled in crystal amber, and cool claret glowed in glasses of emerald green—an inviting display. The room was lit by a German chandelier of white and brown hart's horns, pendant from the low ceiling; and candlesticks of similar material were

ranged on the shelf for bedroom use. A curtain of thick red frieze, drawn along the end of the room, concealed the windows and excluded the keen air of a Highland autumnal night.

"Well, Auber, tell us of your stalk!"

"Do not speak to me, Marchmoram! The equanimity of a lifetime lost its balance to-day," and Auber laughed. "That confounded gillie, Sandy Mac Tavish! he sacrificed a royal head! You thought I started sluggishly, but my blood warmed, and I had such a stalk! There is a gash on my knee which must cripple me for a week. It is well, with the sequel I have to tell, that with me—*ce n'est pas la victoire mais le combat qui fait mon bonheur!* At four o'clock, Ian Mac Gillivray lay hanging on the jut of the shoulder of Corricandhu, Sandy Mac Tavish in the pass of Stronichie, and myself enduring cramp amongst the high ferns at the Bogle's Spring. Ralph, who was crouched by my side, suddenly made my fingers tingle by the whisper—'They are coming—they are coming. I saw the advancing antlers above Stronichie a minute ago! I hope Sandy will have the sense to hide himself and your rifle ere they reach the pass!' By Jove, ere the words were well out of his mouth I heard my own rifle crack, and there was Sandy tearing down towards us, brandishing the piece above his head, his kilt and hair flying back on the scent. He was shouting as he ran—'Och hone! och hone! but I did na kill her!' I really felt blind for a moment. I did not let fly my rifle at the rascal as you might have done; but Ralph seized him, and nearly shook his ragged jacket off him, exclaiming, 'Kill what, you devil?'

"'Hoch, och! the staig—the bonny staig!'

"'Were you clean daft, Sandy? Why did you fire? You know fine you were only to hold the gun for Mr. Auber.'

"I declare the idiot began to blubber, and scratching his head, he whined—'Och, I was feared she wad hae stuck me when I seen her wallaching down on me!' I told him to lay down my traps and return to black cattle herding, for he was no longer a Dreumah gillie; but he cried so bitterly, and called me so many soft Gaelic 'dears' and 'loves' that I relented, and forgave him. I don't feel sure that his enthusiasm may not prove a very promising beginning."

"I have no doubt of it, Auber," said Marchmoram, laughing. "You have won a devoted slave. The fellow was no more afraid of the stag sticking him than you were; he fired because he supposed you only wanted the venison, and thought

he would get it for you if he could ; and now he will prove his zeal and gratitude by a hundred future good services."

"Here, Auber, let us know to-morrow's beats," said Harold, taking up a shooting cap that lay on the table.

"Give Stronichie to me," Auber replied, as he dived his hand into the cap, and pulled out a slip of paper. There were two left, and Marchmoram exclaimed as he drew his, "Oh ! the Roua Pass ;" with a grim smile. "I like that. I have never roused its echoes yet."

"And I am monarch of Stronichie to-morrow, Auber," cried Harold. "You must kill grouse on the flat of Bohrdell, I suppose, Auber."

"No, no ; I would sooner try some hauls on the loch, or walk to the post-office ! I shall draw my next trigger on Stronichie, I am determined, though the lottery should deny me for a week !"

"And take Sandy Mac Tavish to 'stick' your stag, Auber," laughed Marchmoram.

"Auber," said Harold, quietly, "if you will take Mac Tavish with you to-morrow you shall have Stronichie."

"Agreed, Harold !" replied Auber ; and, taking up a little bell, he rang it shrilly at the door.

The pompous Thorold emerged from a low wooden door at the end of a narrow passage, and advanced with an affected air.

"Do you wish the keepers, my lo— sir, I beg your pardon."

"See if Sandy Mac Tavish is in the gillies' shed, and send Ralph here with the answer."

With a stately bow the valet turned to a shelf which ran along the passage wall, took down a silver candlestick with a wax light, and retreated. He then entered a room not unlike a three-stalled stable ; there were three high partitions in it, and each partition was a miniature bedroom for Messrs. Thorold, Gupini, and Greaves, the respective valets of the three gentlemen. Mr. Thorold lit his candle at a small iron lamp which hung from the ceiling, and taking an embroidered cigar-case from his waistcoat pocket, he ignited an Havanna, and passed into the kitchen. Several smart caps and ribbons were fluttering among the group of gray-clad men at the fire-side, and Mr. Thorold bestowed a few killing winks as he raised the light to a becoming height from his head, puffed out a volume of smoke, and gracefully stepped forth into the frosty air.

The moon was at the full, shining solemnly on the dark scenery beneath, and casting awful shadows from the high-peaked hills that accorded with the lone silence of the night. It was with uncomfortably quick step that Thorold, who, a few minutes before, had been sneering at the tales of Gaelic ghosts told by the lodge kitchen fire, now proceeded by the deep rushing river towards the tarred shedding where the dogs and gillies dwelt together, and whence human sounds proceeded: the strains of a Gaelic song, in its shrill minor key, arose from one part of the building, while a deep baying of hounds made a bass accompaniment from the other. Thorold placed his candlestick on the ground, and putting both hands to his ears, kicked at the door. The song ceased, and a fearful din of voices and noises rose within; he kicked again, and was in the act of balancing for a third fling, when the door burst suddenly open, and a cloud of peat smoke and a troop of wild-looking men rushed forth simultaneously. Two of the gillies were in deadly fight, the others encouraging them with the most unearthly shrieks and yells. Blind with rage and excitement, the two Highlanders struggled furiously on towards the river bank, and the superb valet was thrown over and trampled on. Scrambling from among their bare legs, he fled towards the lodge, screaming for help, and Marchmoram and Harold were soon on the scene of action.

A wild scene it was. About twenty half-clad men, in tattered kilts of gray, their arms and legs mostly bare, were struggling and fighting in the moonlight, with mad shouts and gestures. The two principal combatants were unequally matched: one was a youth of twenty, slightly made, though tall, with a thin pale face and light red hair; his antagonist was a brawny shepherd of thirty, a short, heavy, beetle-browed man. Recklessly, as if with the strength of a battering ram, he was beating back his younger rival nearer and nearer to the brink of the precipice above the river. The young man's expression in his desperate resistance was terrible: with teeth clenched and eyes burning black with rage, he wrestled madly; the pale face seeming marble-like in its fixed intensity: though faint in body he was indomitable in will.

"Mac Coinich and Mac Crow for ever! Caberfeidh! Caberfeidh!"* he shouted. The next moment he rolled backwards and over he went, headlong into the deep black pool below.

* Mackenzie and Macrae for ever! Caberfeidh! the war cry of the Mackenzie clan.

"Good God! Save him!—A guinea to the best swimmer!" cried Marchmoram. "Grant, you are a murderer," he shouted, —seizing the shepherd by his shoulder. "Stop this fight."

"Ewen Mackenzie can swoom like a saulmon; he'll no get but a good steep," muttered the man sulkily. As he spoke, a ghastly face appeared above the ridge, and then the whole dripping figure of the youth; he was panting and gasping, but advanced keenly towards Grant. Marchmoram seized his arm, and held him back.

"What has made you fight, Mackenzie?" he asked.

"Och, I'll tell the trowth mysel'," called out a squat little man from the ring formed round them. "Hamish Grant's the fine singer, an' he was crying out fine a song on his own Clan Alpine. Och, but he offered to sing it was the oldest clan amang us.

"'Ye're nae blate to say that,' said Ewen, 'and a Mackenzie by.'

"'Say ye'r wull of the Mackenzies,' retorted Hamish, 'they're but a new race to the Grants. Hae I not wi' my ain een seen in black and white, in a book as old as Ben Nevis, the pedigree of the Grants? in the vary middle o' the pedigree it says—'Aboot this time the world was created, and Adam and Eve born,' and never a word o' the Mackenzies. Na! na! not e'en at the Flood, and that no sae far back.'

"'Hout tout! yer'e daft,' cried Ewen; 'think ye,' says he, 'that when Noah had his ark, Lord Seaforth had n' a bit sloop o' his ain?'

"'I dinna ken,' says Hamish; 'but I hae heard my great-grandfather say, when I was a wee laddie, that a meesprint had been made; and in the pedigrees before Adam, where it was put "*Giants* lived in these days," it was *Grants* was meant.'

"'I dinna mind that,' says Ewen; 'ye may be as auld as Ben Nevis; but Loch Mariwater is thicker than Grant bluid.' Then up wi' Ian Macrae, of Kintail, to back him. The Red Mac Coinichs and the Black Mac Craws were aye herded: they wad horn us to the death did we no combine; so we all up at once. The six Macraes and mysel', Sandy Mac Tavish, focht wi' Ewen—for he's far from his country here; an' the Frasers, Ian Mohr, Ronald Roy, an' Shawen Mac Gillivray sided up with the Grants. It was a touzeling, man! But gie us a dram to cool our bluid, an' we'll sleep like bairns thegither again the night."

Marchmoram and Harold both laughed.

"Shake hands, Hamish Grant and Ewen Mackenzie," said Marchmoram, "and listen :—I'll stand no such barbarism as this :—you are my servants at present, and, as such, I'll have order maintained amongst you ; any repetition of a scene like this, and I'll look out for other gillies, and you may go and fight out your feuds elsewhere, Ewen Mackenzie, you require discipline. Now, shake hands," turning towards the two.

Hamish put out his hand stupidly. Ewen touched it with clenched fingers, and, giving Marchmoram a look of bitter defiance, cried in a shrill voice, "Sassenach, riamh !—Erich, agus tenginn, Conas ! Conas ! " * A wolfish-looking colly dog sprang to his side, and they both soon disappeared on the black track by the river edge.

"What did he say ? " asked Harold, turning to Marchmoram. "Is that Scotch independence ? "

"That some of the Highland pride I have told you about. He's off to his own fireside again ; probably to starve on potatoes for the rest of the season."

"Sandy Mac Tavish, Mr. Auber wishes you to call him at four o'clock to-morrow morning :—you and he are to stalk Stronichie."

Sandy gave a sly grin, and hung down his head.

CHAPTER III.

EWEN MACKENZIE.

Man kinder at the festive board,
 Man braver with the spear and sword,
 Man higher framed for truth,—more strong
 In virtue, sovereign sense, or song,
 In Scotland ne'er trod down the dew.
 —The thistle grows aboon the rose.—ALLAN CUNNINGHAM.

Kilmeny looked up wi' a lovely grace,
 But nae smile was seen on Kilmeny's face;
 Still was her look, and still was her 'ee,
 As the stillness that lay on emerant lea.—Hogg.

EWEN Mackenzie stepped through the heather like a deer.
The step of the Highlander is high and springing : watch him

* *Englishman, never !—Arise, and let us go, Conas.*

ascend a hill, he lifts the knee with such elasticity and equality, that down comes the foot with equal decision on the unequal and the smooth. He steps on a rock or over a hole, and on he goes without shadow of doubt or hesitation ; his eye following the eagle's flight above, but his foot firm on the native heather beneath. If a hill is very steep, he generally ascends slowly, with long grasping strides, which speedily bring him to the top. The Englishman, impetuous in life and spirits, tries to take it as his hunter would : he bounds and scrambles ; his feet slip ; he pants and wipes his brow, and turns at last to take a lesson from Sandie. The second season finds him master of the hills ; and he can no longer be beaten. Ewen strode on fast and faster. He followed the same route that Marchmoram took the day he walked to the post ; but he took cuts through the heather, avoided the beaten road, and entered his mother's shealing in shorter time than the latter took.

He was the second son of Esmé's foster-mother, Florh Mackenzie. She was a woman well to do. Her eldest son, Huistan, managed part of the large sheep farm which Glenbenrough kept in his own hands ; and consequently, as in the old patriarchal fashion, he possessed a goodly flock of his own. As an honest man and an excellent shepherd, he had grown high in the laird's favour ; but his homely nature took its silent way in the simple pastoral path of his duties, too abstractedly to please or strike sympathy from his mother's worldly-scheming brain. Florh appreciated not those first germs of all which made Huistan so admirable a shepherd. His sagacity, endurance, honesty, and faithfulness, went to her no further than to his sheep : they belonged but to them. Had he been a farmer, even, with labourers to discipline, he would have ranked higher in her estimation. Huistan's life and affections seemed pretty equally divided amongst his mother, the laird, and the sheep. The former held first sway, and fierce, over poor Huistan : she ruled him as he did his colly dog. And so she ought : had not she reared him, and struggled for him, when he was left fatherless ; and was it not she who, by her influence in the Glenbenrough nursery, had built his fortune ? More than Huistan might feel the sway of Florh. She was a woman of shrewd sense and masculine will ; had her sphere and her powers been higher, the elements in her character would likely have formed strange despotism : *lines of queen-mothers gone before would have risen again to confound the world,*

Florh had been foster-mother in another family, ere nursing Esmé. Her husband had been what is called a crofter—that is to say, a tenant of very small degree—on the west coast property of Arduashien, and in his life-time she had nursed the only son of Mac Alastair, young Normal, who was the same age as her own boy, Ewen. Three years later, her husband, the crofter, died; and a posthumous girl dying in its birth, Mrs. Mac Alastair recommended Florh to Glenbenrough; where she nursed the little Esmé, second daughter of the laird, and where she remained nurse in chief until the latter reached her fifteenth year. In that time she had also carefully reared the little Ishbel, Esmé's younger sister, and had nursed and tended Mrs. Mac Neil of Glenbenrough in her last illness. Huistan and Ewen, Esmé's foster-brothers, grew up as little gillies and retainers about the house; they caught and saddled the ponies for the three little ladies, rowed them in their boat when desired, and were at the beck and bend of each and all—Norah, Esmé, and Ishbel, the three daughters of Glenbenrough—and would have proudly died in their service. But Florh lost not sight of the future. Huistan grew strong and tall; he was seven years older than Miss Norah, and was placed under the tutelage of the shepherd. Ewen reached his fifteenth year—he was a year older than Miss Norah—and Florh went all the way to Arduashien on one of the children's ponies, Ewen leading the bridle. There she saw Mrs. Mac Alastair, and persuaded her to take Ewen as own valet to the youthful Normal, Florh's first and dearly-beloved foster-son. Four or five years later Florh saw her present home built, and Huistan installed as head shepherd with the laird; then she left Glenbenrough, and took up her abode with her son. She spun the wool, and managed the farm, so that substance increased steadily with her; and she hoped to leave such portions to her sons as the exertions of her husband never could have attained.

Normal Mac Alastair having been sent south for education, Ewen returned to his mother; he was her youngest son and her favourite, and, as is generally the case, far less worthy than Huistan, the good and plodding son. Ewen was of an indolent nature; he was active and agile in bodily strength, but he despised work: he would not have taken to the drudgery of a trade, and he would not settle to the hard-working routine of the shepherd's life. He was attached to *his young master*, Normal Mac Alastair, and to his mother;

but, presuming on her indulgence to himself (the only weakness in Florh's character), he was guilty of ill-temper or disrespect towards her whenever it suited him. He was of a vindictive and sullen temper; and, with the concentration of the Scottish character, would brood over any cause of offence until revenge or time blotted it out. Florh had obliged him to apply for occupation as a Dreumah gillie, when the 12th of August brought the party north; but he had not been there a fortnight when he thus decamped. His sullen pride had been wounded from the first, at finding himself the cypher he was in that establishment. He—the companion of the young Laird of Arduashion, who had waited on him by day and often slept at his feet by night, the same plaid covering them both; he—Ewen Mackenzie—made so low now! His English masters, seeming scarce aware of his existence, deeming it an honour to give a nod, and all commands heard through a Lowland game-keeper, who could not shoot a deer or clean a gun as he could! The abundant food and whisky were not the bait to him that they were to others, for he had always been accustomed to that at Glenbenrough and Arduashien. He showed his dissatisfaction by bitter gibes and sullenness; and Ralph, the head keeper, had already made Marchmoram aware of Ewen's intractability, when the latter gave him the rebuke which roused at once the smouldering fire into rage and hatred.

It was past midnight when Ewen reached his mother's house; but he awakened her and Huistan, and gave his version of the affair of Dreumah. She believed it, but said little: as was her wont.

“Well, my son, get you to your bed, and take three hours' sleep. There is to be valuation in the morn at Lochandhu; the laird is to meet Huistan there, and you'll get down to Glenbenrough and go up with the laird and his men in the morn.”

The gray light was scarce dawning as Ewen was again on the heather, and now following the track which Esmé and her pony had cantered over. The pale moon still feebly shone, but it was her dying hour; and as he came to the first meeting with the river Rouagh, she gently expired, and red rays from the coming sun lit up the water. The river came rushing from Loch Nightach, close to the lodge of Dreumah, and here crossed the beaten road; which, as I have said before, extended to within three miles of that lodge. A one-arch stone bridge spanned the water, and the road continued with many windings until the river again intercepted; the second time,

the waters had so shallowed at that spot that a ridge of gravel plainly marked a ford. The road then branched from the river and wound through woods of silver-birch, closing in all view, until a sudden opening revealed the river again. And now there was a choice of ways, for the road forked, and led you again across the river by a light wooden bridge, and up to the door of hospitable Glenbenrough; or you kept on your way, and the road wandered on, leaving the water behind, and fifteen miles of precipitous route brought you to the market town of Braemar. But when Ewen reached the first bridge of one arch, he went a little lower and crossed the river by a ford, which brought him to the second ford more rapidly than the road; and when he crossed the second ford he paused. The road stretched on to Glenbenrough; but there was a shorter cut. A narrow path led like a thread up the rugged sides of a rocky hill which based the water's edge, it was cut out of the side of the slippery rock, or formed by an uneven natural ledge; the edge of the precipice as it ascended being half concealed by feathery fern and light-rooted birch, with glimpses between, showing the blackness of the deep river pools beneath. So narrow was the path that the eye dared not to leave watching the feet; up it went, higher and higher, and steeper and steeper became the climb, until by a few bounds, with straining muscles and bending knees, Ewen gained the summit.

Then came the Roua (or Red) Pass. To descend on the other side, the broad jutting shoulder must be passed;—the path leading round it being cut out of the rock which frowns toweringly above and descends sheer beneath, a hundred fathoms down to the roaring river edge; the sides shelved in rough layers of red clay and sand, washed by the rain of centuries into blood-coloured ruts and furrows. The path is red and crumbled on the outer brink; there is not a stone nor a stick to hold by, and the distracting screams and quick flights of the hawks around and above might well unnerve the unpractised eye or foot: a few fir posts had once been sunk along the edge, but they had mostly rotted and toppled helplessly over. The Pass takes a sharp turn, and, the broad shoulder passed, many might have thrown themselves on the rugged bosom of the hill and hugged it in their trembling thankfulness for safety; but not Ewen, nor any of the family of Glenbenrough. The path led down the hill, covered on *this side with bright heather and birch; fields of verdant grass*

shining beneath, dotted with herds of grazing cattle. An old grey stone house stood in the midst, enshrined amongst ancient trees of sycamore, fir, and lime, which stretched to the river; further on were seen a wooden bridge spanning the gliding stream, and the wooded roads beyond which lead to it.

The house of Glenbenrough was very old. Mr. Mac Neil often said that if he had a son, he would pull it down and, by a judicious mortgage, build a modern one, in good taste, that his name, as its founder, might go down to his great-grandchildren: most likely for them to criticise the architecture, exactly as he now did his great-grandfather's. But there was no male heir to Mac Neil; he had never had a son, and the land was to pass to strangers; his three daughters might in time marry the sons of other families; so he was content to do good in his own generation, and be the father of his people, spending the rental amongst them while he lived. And a most indulgent father to his family and the people, Glenbenrough was; he was one of the race now fast dying out, or being bought out, in the Highlands. His pedigree was dear to him, for its long list of deeds of valour and honour achieved by his ancestors; it had been handed down to him without stain, and he gloried in keeping it so. His eye kindled, and his step grew firmer, as he paced the room of an evening, recounting old lore of genealogy to listening daughters; and he exultingly dwelt on the days of his own young prowess, when he proved himself a worthy son of his "forbears" in personal bravery and power of endurance.

He told them of himself and his cousin, Sir Alastair, leading the Glenbenrough and Strathshielie men against those of all Strathfarra, and winning games of shinty five years running; and of the weeks that he and Arduashien had slept on the heather crowned heights to mark and kill deer of royal heads; of the bonfires made to roast the carcass whole, and the dancing of Hie'land lads and lasses round the blaze. In those days claret was drunk pure from Bordeaux, and smuggled whisky sixty over proof; but the wine and whisky gave no headaches to them: men could drink seven bottles of claret in a night, and went out to spear salmon by the rising sun without a tremble in the hand! John Neil Mac Neil was a fine-looking man, of, it might be, fifty years; of a tall and upright figure; his gray hair was full upon the temples, and his bright blue eye smiled more than his thin but well-cut lips. His features were rather sharp, but the lineaments of his ancestors were there—men who had anciently commingled blood of Gael with

Gael in love as well as war—transmitting descent of Celtic bravery at home, united with chivalrous marriage abroad. Not an eye that rested on that face amongst the people far and near, but lighted kindly, and a Gaelic benediction followed.

In the Highlands of Scotland, a proprietor stands morally on ground as different from that of one in England as he does literally; indeed it must be so, were it merely for the vast extent of ground, comparatively speaking, which forms a property in the Highlands. Sixty thousand acres is but a medium sized estate in the Highlands, whereas three thousand acres would make a goodly property in England: aye, and the latter in its produce and its rental would swallow up the needy tracts of the former. The sixty thousand acres being spread over wild hills and bogs, lakes and rivers, forming a whole country, and with its native inhabitants too—the beasts and birds of the Pictish forests, and the people of one name, who love the soil and the waters as their flesh and blood—the proprietor of the Highland estate may wander at his will for days and days, his feet springing on his own heather land, and the towering hills above owning him as their lord. The people are scattered few and far, but the extent is great; and were he to call a gathering of his clan, they would start up from the furthest corries, and come hastening in to receive the bidding of his will. The rents they pay are small, but the honour they bring is great; and who can command the oft-coveted allegiance of fellow-men on a prouder feeling of independence more readily than a legitimate Highland laird, beloved by his tenantry?

It was no wonder if Glenbenrough was of a keen and impetuous temper; a Highland laird has not so much need to govern it. In a fit of passion, when his blood was younger, he had once thrown a tenant into the river, and the man had said, as he emerged all dripping, "Laird, laird, why did you trouble yourself?" But roughness was far from being naturally the temperament of Mac Neil. His sense of honour, unflinching truth, and courage, gave him the pride of independence; and he had that courtesy of manner which a kindly nature taught: his heart beat with cordial warmth to all his fellow-creatures. Hospitality descended as an hereditary virtue to Glenbenrough, as it did to most of his Highland contemporaries; it was genial and genuine as himself, and as extensive as his father's had been, only more discriminating.

A low flight of steps led up to the house door, which stood open until the winter snow came to block it up. The hall was

decorated on one side with arms of the olden time, arranged in many fantastic devices ; several Lochaber axes formed pillars on either side of a rude leathern target studded with brass, which was surrounded by a row of naked dirks to represent a mimic sun. The ponderous battle-axe of Eachin Bohroogh, first chief of the Mac Neils, lay harmless beside the huge claymore of his rival. Weapons which had never met, save in mortal hate and strife, here crossed each other, rusted with disuse ; and part of the boyish armour of a great grand uncle of Glenbenrough, who had died in the service of France, lay loyally on a *fleur-de-lis* casket which Prince Charles had sent to the family fifty years later. The three other sides of the hall were hung with red-deer hides, above which reared the branching antlers on heads of deer in every attitude of life (some of them shot nigh two hundred years ago), which frowned, with royal gaze, upon the ascending visitor. A narrow staircase led to the drawing-room, which was thickly matted with red and roe deer skins, the walls being adorned with trophies of sport. It was a large and airy apartment, carpeted with a thick drugget of plaid pattern ; a blazing fire of coal and pine, which filled the room with warm spruce scent, lighted up the solid old black furniture. Quaint old pieces of tapestry, framed in oak carvings of fruit and flowers, from which faces fit for Moloch and Puck peeped out ; the subjects as antiquated as the style, showing scarlet ladies with azure ribands transfixed by a malicious Cupid in a red jacket, poised on his left leg, and gallant hunters issuing from pigmy forests with a most tender simper. Several old mirrors on the walls, also in carved frames, were ornamented by fresh tendrils of deers' grass hanging in profusion like a drapery ; but the chief thing to strike the eye in the room was the beautiful arrangement of flowers : on each table, even on the piano, were groups of flowers—no rare or conservatory flower amongst them, but common garden flowers arranged in such taste in colour by Norah Mac Neil, as to delight the eye, and a stand between two of the three windows was filled with water-lilies, their tendrils drooping to the carpet.

Esmé sat near the lilies, leaning on the broad sill of the window and looking up the river, which stretched its silver flood as far as eye could reach ; the hills rising from the very water were some of bare rock, others were clothed with dark green pine and purple birch, and some wrapped in heather and grass. Another window looked only on the Roua Pass and some of the distant peaks of Dreumah beyond ; and the third

window showed the garden and rocky orchard at the back of the house. It was about six o'clock in the afternoon, and Norah, Esmé, and Ishbel Mac Neil were seated in the drawing-room, waiting their father's return from his sheep valuation at Lochandhu. Norah was a tall girl of twenty, with a slight though handsome figure. A clear and vivid complexion gave expression to very regular features, which generally were in rather grave repose; yet when she smiled the rich brunette of eye and cheek lighted into brightness: indeed, the face was better worth studying in its softly coming lights and shades than many a more sunny countenance. Norah was naturally amiable and thoughtful, and her power of self-regulation was intuitive. It was her duty to guide and govern her father's house and the two younger children; to see that hospitality was practised without waste, and that charity should be given wherever needed; to study that her father's income should meet its many local demands, and to humour and honour the warmth of heart and impetuous temper which made him beloved and feared by all his dependants. It was her thoughtful eye that strove to see Esmé and little Ishbel properly balancing each other: Esmé required to have the cord of Norah's sound sense put round her sometimes.

The three sisters were dressed alike in white muslin, with bare arms and necks: being strong and healthy, they never muffled in the evening. Norah had a bouquet of deers'-grass and heather, pinned with a shawl brooch, on her corsage; Esmé and Ishbel had each a ribbon of the royal Stuart tartan passed, snood like, through their hair, which hung in natural curls upon their shoulders. Ishbel was like Norah, a bright brunette, with very dark hair; but she had a piquant little face, and her eyes were more restless than Norah's. She was but fifteen, and promised to be also very tall, being now nearly of equal stature with Esmé; who would never overtake Norah's rather unusual height. Esmé wanted but a short space to her eighteenth birthday; though from her fairness, she looked younger. Her features were not nearly so regular as those of her sisters, but in expression they varied with every mood—
 at . . . and shade, sunshine and moonlight, came there, incon-
 f . . . in a northern summer; though with her these phases
 we . . . the reflections of a somewhat dreamy inner life on a
 nob . . . speaking face: for even Norah's equal temper was not
 more sweet and enduring than hers. Esmé's eyes and hair
 were of rare beauty; the latter of the pure Scandinavian gold,

without a tinge of red or brown to darken it, and it hung in wavy tresses to her waist : she knew it was uncommon, and liked to see it glitter in the sun. Her eyes were of a peculiar tint of blue : when she sat in thought the pupil darkened and dilated into a dreamy fullness, emulating the wrapt fervour of a Magdalen, or the earnest sadness of the Cenci ; but when she was aroused to lively discussion, or struck by a sense of the ludicrous, the blue sparkled with vivid colour, and kindled into intensity as imagination was excited.

Esmé was far from being sentimental at this moment, for she exclaimed impatiently, "Norah, Norah ! who will come back with papa from Lochandhu to-day ? There will be old Borlagh, and Dr. Macconochie, and old Macpherson of Phee ; and they'll talk of ewes and haggets and wedders, and the dining-room will be perfumed by whisky toddy for a week. I shan't sit near old Borlagh, he makes me ill !"

"Nor I either, Norah !" echoed little Ishbel. "Esmé, Esmé, you guessed right, here they are all coming down the Roua Pass ; but there is another man with papa, and papa is pointing out the bridge and house to him : he is a stranger !"

Esmé ran to the other window, and a slight blush passed over her face, as she exclaimed, "A saving clause ! Norah, here is the man I told you about, whom I saw at Lochandhu yesterday. Where in the world has papa met him ? I am so glad."

Glenbenrough and Marchmoram entered the room shortly after the other guests. The idea of any little toilette duties, or even slight ablution after the handling of the sheep and other occupations of the day, never entered the head of one of these worthy old men ; and it was well their huge nailed brogue shoes rested on the sensible drugget of the Glenbenrough drawing-room, a Turkey carpet must have suffered. This was the first time that the idea of dining in the company of ladies in his shooting-dress became familiar to Marchmoram : he knew that in these remote regions it was looked upon as a matter of course, in circumstances like the present ; but he found it difficult to reconcile himself to this breach of etiquette.

Glenbenrough had met Marchmoram on the summit of the Roua Pass ; it was a portion of his property which the latter had let to the proprietor of Dreumah for the convenience of the sporting tenants, as it made a good boundary to this large tract of shooting ground. He had at once introduced himself to the Englishman, and taking the gun from his hand, turned

him downwards to introduce him to the house of Glenbenrough, with many kind speeches as to hopes of future intimate and kindly acquaintance with him and the rest of the Dreumah party.

The three girls were standing together as their father entered and introduced Marchmoram to them ; dinner being announced at almost the same moment, the pursy Dr. Macconochie, as pastor of the parish and father of a family, seized upon Norah, and ushered her out, Esmé following with Marchmoram, and little Ishbel keeping old Borlagh at arms' length. Marchmoram had had a presentiment that his naiad of the day before might prove one of the Miss Mac Neils, and he had thought of it while shooting that day, and they on hearing his name, knew it as that of the leader of the Dreumah party, and as a name familiar amongst the lower classes around them, who told stories of the wealth and luxury of the establishment, and of the sums generously distributed for two seasons back by the party when they left the country. They had heard from Ewen Mackenzie that very morning, his experience of the pride and power of Dreumah Lodge, and of the distance at which Marchmoram kept his Highland menials.

Marchmoram asked Esmé if she had had a pleasant ride home, and said he saw the lilies had been carried safely.

"Yes, that was a charming evening," she replied, smilingly ; "I did not think we should have met so soon again:" and then, turning archly, she asked, "Can you eat barley broth and roast mutton?"

Marchmoram smiled. "Your mountain air makes my appetite always sharp : I am very hungry."

"Oh, but I mean that Norah ordered dinner to-day for sheep farmers, not for you : you have turtle soup, and a French cook at Dreumah!"

"Yes, Miss Mac Neil, and a dear-bought luxury Mons. Jacques is ; he gives more trouble than even the organization of the Gillie band, and rushes on wringing his hands, if the carrier's cart is delayed an hour beyond time. You know the lodge of Dreumah? Well, when we arrived there this season, Jacques thought we were merely stopping, *en passant*, at the dog-kennel. We all alighted and disappeared in various directions : not one of us had courage to tell him it was to be his *dwelling-place* and to usher him into the kitchen! The news was soon abruptly broke by the game-keepers, and he went and *sacré'd* in French fashion until he was exhausted."

Esmé laughed heartily, and Marchmoram asked if she approved of French cookery.

"I have very seldom tasted it, only when visiting some of our friends; but habit, we all know, is life; and as you only come to the Highlands for enjoyment, you are right to use all accessories to it. Now I don't like haggis, but it does not disturb me to see it at table; I simply choose grouse, and drink water when my neighbour takes spruce beer; but even the sight of it might spoil your appetite. In the same way,"—here she dropped her voice to a whisper,—“I know how good and kind an old man Macpherson of Phee is, while you merely see him to be shockingly vulgar.”

Norah was talking of the crops to Borlagh, and listening to his details of the potato failure; all of which he ascribed to the “new-fangled, outlandish guano and bone-dust schemes, ruining and naturally diseasing the land.”

Esmé turned to Mr. Macpherson, and asked him with smiling significance, if he had had any excisemen lately visiting at Phee. He chuckled, shrugged his shoulders, and rubbed his hands with delight, saying—

“Hout tout, Miss Esmé; tak’ a bit o’ muir-fowl, and leave you alone!”

“Oh, Phee, tell us of your last barrel;” cried Ishbel—“do you know, Mr. Marchmoram, that Mr. Macpherson buried a barrel of smuggled whisky in his garden ten years ago, and when he went to dig out his treasure a week ago, he found it had evaporated: only the skeleton of the barrel was there; all the staves and hoops tumbled together in the earth! Did he not deserve it?”

“Weel, weel, Miss Ishbel, there’s one in my cellar at any rate will keep for ye’re marriage day! It’ll no do to keep the r’ael stuff anywhere else in these gauger days. Glenbenrough could tell you of other times though: do you mind, sir, of youn’ bit lassie, that Miss Ishbel, I’ll warrant wad ha’e imitated.”

“Yes, that was a good story,” said Glenbenrough; and he told an anecdote of his boyish days, when he knew of every still on the hill side. An alarm was given one day that the excise were coming down the Roua Pass, and he, the young laird, dashed up the face of the opposite hill, and into the cottage of Hamish Stuart. “Hide, Hide!—they come,” was all he had time to say. The words were scarcely out of his mouth when he saw how hopeless was the case. There were only the three children in the house, the eldest a girl of four-

teen ; but she had heard, and, with a quickness of hand and intelligence beyond belief, sprang to the bed, and pulled out from underneath it a large tub of clear distilled whisky ; then, flying to a chest, she threw a quantity of linens into it, and on the floor by it, with some pieces of soap, and stood with sleeves tucked-up, and an empty pitcher in her hand, as the excise officers stopped at the threshold.

"Aye, aye, my lass !" they said, "here we are, and you may call your father and mother as soon as you like, to help us in finding your smuggled store."

"Father's on the hill with the sheep, and mother is before me at the burn for water : we are busy with the washing the day ; but ye may look and search but and ben, and out and in. Ye hae come a long travel to find nothing," she replied boldly.

She then gave her pitcher to a younger sister (not deficient in intelligence either), and desired her to go to the burn and help her mother up with more water, while she coolly proceeded to sort the clothes on the floor. The whisky, not being disturbed, gave forth no evidence. The excise men searched as she had advised them, but and ben, out and in ; and, after an hour's fruitless hunt, marched up the hill to further suspected places, swearing at the wrong information given them of Hamish Stuart.

Marchmoram again turned to Esmé, and asked—

"Does much smuggling still go on in this district ?"

"Yes, more or less each season ; though of course to no extent in comparison with what it did ten or twelve years ago. You know you can't argue the people into it's being wrong ; they think the Queen is rich, and that she cannot possibly require the small amount of duty they keep from her."

Shortly after the dessert had been placed on the table, a silver kettle full of boiling water was brought in, and tumblers with toddy ladles—spoons of a round shape, with long handles of ebony and silver. Glenbenrough called for claret, which was placed opposite Marchmoram, while the host and other guests began to mix their toddy. The young ladies rose and proceeded to the drawing-room ; not long after Marchmoram followed. Norah and Ishbel were not in the room, and Esmé was seated on the window sill, watching the setting sun, as Marchmoram stood beside her.

"Isn't it beautiful ?" she exclaimed, raising her head, her *blue eyes beaming brightly* upon his face.

"*Beautiful !*" he replied, with his own fixed upon her.

"When I was a little girl there was a poor crazy woman lived here; we called her 'Foolish Jeanie:' she was quite harmless, and she used to follow us everywhere and join in our play. What a lover of the sky she was! She used to paint such imagery for us out of the clouds: she improvised courts of royal state and glorious purple robes, and bloody battle-fields with wreathing smoke. I learned to study the scenery of heaven from her thus; so far as it was visible to us."

"I am very sure you know more of heaven than of earth," Marchmoram said in a low voice.

"I love the world so far as I know it," said Esmé, brightly; "I love my own beautiful, beautiful Highlands, where I have never seen any misery; for even the poorest people here are contented: it seems as if the mountain air braced their minds as well as their bodies. They are all happy on the hills: none of our old people would exchange their peat smoke for coal fire in a town."

"Have you never been out of the Highlands?"

"Never;" and she laughed. "Only fancy, I have never seen a railway, or been in a steamboat, even! If I could not read and also listen to people who had travelled, what a little savage I should be!"

Marchmoram did not answer: he seemed absent; yet his eyes were fixed on her neck.

She blushed. "Do you think it wrong my wearing this?" she asked, putting up her hand quickly to a little necklace of scarlet beads round her throat; "it is part of a French rosary my foster-mother gave to me: it belonged to her mother, who was a Roman Catholic; but I only wear it for ornament, and did not think any one would know what it was."

Marchmoram now blushed slightly as he replied, "Oh, no, not at all wrong." He had been gazing at the pure whiteness of her neck, not at the necklace; but Esmé was innocent. Poor child!

"Norah and Ishbel are in the garden; let us go too." They went downstairs and met the sisters in the hall; but Norah threw her plaid on again, and they all sallied out together. The garden was a large rambling one; the upper part at the back of the house was laid out in grass and plats of flowers, with pretty baskets of fir cones and birch, and was nicely kept. It spread on into clumps of trees, flowers, and vegetables, until it joined an old orchard, quite a wilderness of knotted old apple and cherry trees; this swept down to the river banks in front of

the house, but lower down, and the fruit trees became lost amidst birch and chestnut and lime. A boat was moored by a chain to the trunk of an old cherry-tree on the river bank, and in an open summer-house by it were stored trout fishing rods, baskets, and other apparatus.

"Do you like fishing, Mr. Marchmoram?" Norah asked. "We often amuse ourselves with it: at least Ishbel and I; but Esmé is lazy."

"You mean too active, Norah! I don't like it because it requires such patience."

"Well, our reasons assimilate, Miss Esmé: I don't like it, because it is not exciting enough," he said with a smile.

"I wish Normal would come," cried Ishbel, "that we might make some of our excursions. Have you ever seen our cousin Normal, Mr. Marchmoram?"

"No; is he one of the 'clan'?"

"Oh no! He is our nineteenth or twentieth cousin. He is young Arduashien, Mac Alastair of Arduashien's only son: he is instead of a brother to us; but I don't think he will be yours, Esmé!"

"Ishbel! hush. Let us row a little down the river, Norah," said Esmé, unwinding the chain as she spoke. They stepped into the boat, and Norah took one oar while Marchmoram took the other; but he bit his lip, for he was awkward in pulling, and he was afraid the little Celts would laugh; however, the boat glided with the current, and they merely used their oars when Ishbel gave warning of a sunken rock.

"Sing Normal's song, dear Norah," she said, and without further pressing, Esmé and Norah sang sweetly a little Gaelic song, the refrain of which haunted Marchmoram's ears all the evening,

"Foam, Foam, Foam, Essain."

The river banks on both sides were thick with underwood, tall natural hollies, and a species of small wild black cherry-tree peculiar to Scotland; while tall ferns and ivy and honeysuckle grew down to the water's edge. Beyond the green foliage rose the blue and gray ridges of hills, marking the course of the road on the opposite side of the river. The girls pointed out, at one place, the black game sitting heavily on the leafy branches above them. "I think they must know us," cried Ishbel, laughing, "for they are never disturbed when we come floating past them."

The perfume of the honeysuckle was sweet on the river

breeze, and the exquisite note of the thrush and blackbird (they are called the mavis and the merle in Scotland) came with it. The colouring of earth, sky, and water, and the white dresses of the girls, seemed all to blend into beauty together. Marchmoram felt his senses soothed and satisfied. How pleasant it was: enjoyment without distraction. When they returned to the house, the tea table was spread in the drawing-room; a hissing urn rose amid plates piled with oat-cakes, toast, and honey; but there was no appearance of Glenbenrough or his guests.

"You must not think papa remiss, or forgetful of you," Norah said; "but he is talking of his sheep. The old gentlemen of the last generation, like those in the other room, would scarcely think of coming to the drawing-room at all: when they sit long and order fresh relays of toddy, they get quite absorbed in each other's society, and would sit almost all night talking of their past and present. I will go to the piano and play a reel; perhaps that may bring papa."

And shortly after they all appeared; Borlagh, his complexion suffused to purple and his breathing painfully apoplectic, sat down with a grunt upon the sofa; and Dr. Macconochie, having asked Esmé for a "dish of tea," descended stiffly and slowly beside him. Macpherson, of Phee, stood on the rug cracking his fingers and shuffling his feet to the reel tune. Glenbenrough drew Marchmoram to the window, and a discussion on sport and the various beats of Dreumah began. Soon after, Marchmoram said he saw that the gillie whom he had despatched back to Dreumah before dinner was now in waiting with his hill pony, and he thought it as well to get round the Roua Pass in daylight; or rather, ere darkness increased. There were delays, though, ere he had said good-night; and as he mounted at the door, the moon rose pale and silvery behind the hill. "She will lighten the Pass—and don't hold the pony's head," cried Glenbenrough as Marchmoram rode off.

Marchmoram looked back as he ascended the path, and saw three white dresses floating on the threshold of the old gray house; he thought he could distinguish the fair hair of Esmé in the moonlight. As he reached the summit of the Pass the moon was in full splendour, and cast the shadow of himself and pony back towards the house. As the pony turned the abrupt corner, and placed hoof before hoof with faltering step in rounding the Pass, Marchmoram felt a fascination in the danger, and he gazed beneath with unwinking eyelids and

breath suspended. The red precipice ran headlong down—he felt as if leaning over it—and the river beneath was so dark in the distance that the moon only glimmered here and there where the water fretted on a rock. Dark and fantastic shadows lay before him and crossed his path. Just as the pony, with a sort of bound of relief, sprang snorting up on the other side, it reared up in affright so as nearly to strike the outer edge again. A gray clad figure was sitting on the downward path, and Marchmoram, as he spurred the pony past, recognized Ewen Mackenzie, resting on his way back to his mother's cottage at Lochandhu.

"I'll displace ye on the path to Glenbenrough yet," muttered Ewen in Gaelic, as his late master rode on.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FISHING OF LOCH NIGHTACH.

They passed the muir o' berries blae,
The stone dyke on the lea,
They reached the lodge o' the bonny rae
Beneath the birchen tree.

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And they rade on—and they rade on,
And a' by the light of the moon,
Until they cam to yon wan water,
And there they lighted down.—MINSTRELSIE.

It was on the 20th of August that Marchmoram dined at Glenbenrough, and on the 22nd he retraced his steps there and called. The family were from home; the laird and his daughters having gone to Strathshiellie for a couple of days. He left a note inviting Glenbenrough and the Miss Mac Neils to lunch at Dreumah Lodge, and draw Loch Nightach for trout.

"Oh, dear papa, let us go!" cried Ishbel and Esmé together, when this note was found on their return home on the 23rd. "We have not been at Dreumah for several years. What do you say, Norah?"

"I don't know," replied Norah, slightly hesitating. "Papa, do you think it would be perfectly correct?"

"Correct?" Glenbenrough drew himself to his full height.

"What do you mean, child? When with your father all places are correct. The question simply is, do you care to go or not?"

"Norah," rejoined Esmé with quick pride; "*we* do anything incorrect?—The Mac Neils of Glenbenrough! Who would ever dare to say or think it? I am afraid Marion and Julia have been infecting you at Strathshielie. Since their return from that London school they have quite altered, and have become quite like English girls in hours and habits."

Esmé had never known an English girl in her life.

"Well, well," Norah replied, "certainly we may do much as we like here, and I have no wish to see things altered in that respect. Very well, papa, we will go on the 25th, if the day is fine."

On the morning of the 25th the sun shone bright as could be wished, while a slight breeze came rippling from the west—the very day to choose for loch fishing. Glenbenrough at dawn had despatched a cart laden with his quota of nets and men: he was determined that the united appliances of himself and the Dreumah party should that day force Loch Nightach to yield trout and char in quantities sufficient to justify its reputation. At breakfast the girls told their father they would prefer riding to driving, as going by the Roua Pass, instead of by the bridge and road, saved fully half an hour in distance; so at twelve o'clock they mounted. Glenbenrough rode a rough-shod Galloway, and the three girls their respective Shetland ponies,—lovely little creatures, parallel amongst horses to the roe amongst deer; and, like them, peculiar to Scotland. These ponies were almost like dogs in sagacity and attachment to their mistresses, having been in the possession of the girls, and in almost daily use, for some years; not merely for an easy canter on a road, and then to be handed over, on dismounting, to a groom, but as the companions of long summer days,—the pony scrambling with its rider over rocky precipices where the rider might scarcely have gone on foot, and leaping instinctively over bog-pits which would otherwise have proved fatal to both. They generally fed on the hill pastures near the house; and when the girls wished to ride, the ponies, if within hail, would come galloping to their voice. Sometimes, if in their rambles the girls met their quadruped pets when not wanted, they ran, or skirted them till out of sight; for so sure as the view became mutual, the ponies came galloping and *frisking after them like dogs*, and followed them as pertina-

ciously, poking their heads into the pockets of their mistresses' dresses in search of oat-cake or fruit. The girls could all saddle their own ponies when necessary; and generally, on returning from their rides, they had a primitive and not very tidy fashion of ungirthing saddle and bridle and throwing them on the hall-door steps. The pony, thus quickly relieved, would pace away to the hill, while the first servant who might see the harness lying there would bear it off to the stable.

Norah, Esmé, and Ishbel were dressed alike, in skirts and jackets of small-check shepherd-tartan, spun and dyed by their quondam nurse, Florh: it was what is called hard tartan, and of much cooler texture than the soft wool tartan. As they wore skirts of ordinary length in riding their little ponies, you often caught sight of well-shaped feet and ankles, stockings of similar pattern to their dress, and high shoes called brogues, strapped with a buckle and thongs of leather across the instep, and having devices of thistles and deer-heads cut in leather and sown on the upper part of the shoe. Esmé, however, wore a round straw hat, trimmed with broad blue ribbons, as she objected to being sun-burnt; but Norah and Ishbel wore Glen-garry bonnets of dark blue cloth, with a little scarlet top-knot, —a very slight protection from the searching August sun: but his beams only enriched their brunette complexions. The old man-servant, Cameron, and Ewen Mackenzie, who was in attendance, pulled three twigs from a birch-tree, which were to serve as whips; and then, with smiles as bright as the sunshine, the girls gave loose the reins and followed their father up the Roua Pass. Florh Mackenzie was at the door of her cottage as they passed Lochandhu, and waved her hand to them. It was nearly two o'clock by the sun as they turned off the road where it drew towards its close, and struck into the heather track which brought them down upon Dreumah. The baying of the kenneled dogs would have been a guide to its exact locality; but Marchmoram was himself standing on a hillock above the lodge, and sprang forward to meet them the moment Glenbenrough came in sight. His face was beaming with health and pleasure, and the thorough ease and *empressement* of his manner made the girls feel as if he were an old acquaintance whom they had come upon by surprise.

Two gentlemen in gray shooting dresses were standing at the door as they all arrived, and Marchmoram introduced them as *his friends*, Mr. Harold and Mr. Auber. They also had the *same bland manner* of pleasant welcome, cordial yet quiet

Glenbenrough shook their hands with both his, his kindly nature expressive in the grasp. He spoke to Marchmoram as he might have done to a nephew,—“We shall have capital sport; the day could not be better. My dear fellow, I have taken the liberty of sending on my man Sandie and my large trout net; which, in conjunction with yours, will do the work well, I think. The girls tired!—not they, indeed. They have enjoyed the ride as much as I have.”

Harold and Auber were admiring the ponies as they assisted in the dismounting.

“Yes, they are as good as brothers to us,” Esmé said; “they take us wherever we wish.”

“We thank them for bringing you here to-day,” Auber replied, stroking her pony’s head. “What pretty names have you invented for them?”

“Mine is Suil-a—pronounced Zala: it means ‘beautiful eyes,’ in Gaelic. See how it turns them now when I speak: aren’t they beautiful brown animal eyes? My sister Norah’s pony is called Kelpie, and Ishbel’s, Methal.”

“And what is the translation of these two latter?”

“Oh! don’t you know the Kelpie? It is a wicked little water spirit, very common in the Highlands: it lives in brown burns and tarns. I think I have often seen it,” and she laughed merrily; “and Methal is Gaelic for ‘darling.’”

There was a move into the lodge, where lunch was spread in the sitting-room, and the door of Marchmoram’s room, marked B. No. 2, stood open. The girls entered, dropped their hats and gloves, and smoothed their hair with Marchmoram’s ivory-handled brushes, laid out for their use. They would have needed no cosmetic to efface the marks of weather, for their complexions flushed clear with health. Exercise had darkened Esmé’s eyes into violet blue; the pupil dilated soft and black, and one cheek burned a deeper pink than the other. She was in merry spirits, and lived in the present, just now: no walking dream or reverie was on her face, or in her thoughts, as oft at other times: they were to come by-and-by.

Greaves, Harold, and Gupini, the respective valets, now appeared *en train*, bearing various dishes, and lunch was announced. Marchmoram and Auber took their seats at the head and foot of the table; Norah sat next the former, and Esmé by the latter, while Harold sat betwixt the sisters, with Ishbel and Glenbenrough opposite. It was a *recherché* lunch in its display of delicacies, and Mons. Jacques had exerted

himself in French cookery ; for the *entremets* were puzzling in name and number. Iced champagne flowed freely, and conversation with it, sparkling and exhilarating. Sport in the Highlands was fully discussed, and illustrated with anecdotes of famous "stalks" and wild adventures, the girls joining in the talk with ease that showed it to be an habitual topic. The habits of the deer and the grouse seemed familiar to them, as those of domestic poultry might have been to English girls ; natural history, native character and scenery, the Highlanders and their superstitions, succeeded each other in general conversation. Esmé's lively sallies took Marchmoram's attention most frequently. Everything she said had more or less point, and there was such perfect artlessness and simplicity in her youthful manner that not the faintest shadow of presumption could be traced in it : it was bracing, healthy talk, and renovating to the spirits.

A hum of voices outside, and the gray tops of congregated bonnets seen above the window-sill, showed that the gillies were in waiting ; and at half-past three the party adjourned again to the open air. There were about thirty men standing or sitting on the grass, who rose and gave a shout of readiness as hosts and guests appeared ; many of the gillies saluted Glenbenrough and his daughters in Gaelic welcome, and then darted off in advance for the loch.

Norah walked by Marchmoram, who led the way ; they passed the gillies' shedding, stopping at the kennel, where Ralph, the head gamekeeper, stood superior, gazing with a quiet Saxon smile after the wild Highland phalanx flying past in such excitement. He turned with alacrity to show his dogs, which the ladies fully admired ; he also explained the facility for cleanliness afforded by the river passing through the length of the kennel. Esmé lost her meed of favour in his eyes when he heard her remark to Marchmoram that she wished they would dilute with water the unlimited milk used in the canine porridge, and give her that part saved from the dogs for some of her cottage children !

The foaming little river, which they followed, wound itself a tortuous way round several of the barrier hills until it threw itself into Loch Nightach, at the back of the lodge, and not half a mile from it. It was a loch of about two miles in extent, and completely surrounded by cold, gray rocky hills ; the water, *even in sunshine*, looked more leaden than silvery ; but a fringe of birch, which grew all along the edges, gave it a green gar-

nishing. Human voices now made the solitude ring around, as half a dozen men sprang into a boat, carrying a net, to one end of which was attached a rope with a wooden handle that was grasped by a band of men on shore. When the boat pushed off, the crew took a wide circle in the water, dropping the net as they proceeded, until they again approached the shore at a distance from the starting point, where the other men stood stationary. Part of the crew now sprang on shore, holding one end of the net by the rope and handle, and both parties pulled together, drawing the net in towards land; while some men left in the boat kept paddling in the water with their oars, and shouting to frighten the imprisoned fish from attempting to escape. 'Midst yells and barbaric shouts the nets were hauled in to shore, landing hundreds of trout, pike, and char upon the beach; and then a rush and scramble ensued, the captors throwing themselves on the living shoal, and striking the life out of the fish with stones and oars. Glenbenrough was active and energetic as the merest Highland boy amongst them; and with memoranda-book in hand, shouted in Gaelic to the gillies as he wrote down the numbers taken in each successive haul.

After the second haul had taken place, Esmé turned to Ishbel and whispered to her, when they both left the group amongst which they stood, and ran some paces off to the birch-trees; not many seconds afterwards, a thin cloud of blue smoke arose, and a fire was blazing on the beach further down. The three gentlemen and Norah proceeded thither, and found Esmé on her knees building a hearth with flat stones before a fire of brushwood, while Ishbel was gathering fuel to add to it.

"Does not that look comfortable?" Esmé exclaimed, with childish glee. "I am sure the evening will be cool; besides it will be fun to roast some of the fish!"

"And how in the name of all the fire worshippers did you accomplish this, Miss Esmé?" asked Marchmoram.

She pointed to a little brass match-box by her side: "This was in my pocket: I always carry it, for we constantly light fires when we are out on the hills. Here are more comforts," she added laughing, as she pulled out of her pocket a little quagh, a strong penknife, a pinecushion, a roll of twine, and a compass in a case, the size of a locket.

"You are quite a little campaigner," Marchmoram said: "*I find I can take hints from you in many ways.*"

"And now you shall see how to roast fish, if you will hav

them prepared," Esmé said. She and Ishbel then placed two tall sticks upright in the ground before the fire, tied them at the top, and fastening several hook-shaped twigs with string to the top of the supports, she soon had a row of trout and char pendant before the glowing fire; and, as they broiled, she cut twigs of birch into rude pronged forks. The char and trout were dull in colour, like their native water, and had a mossy or peaty flavour when cooked.

About a dozen hauls had been made, and between each there were copious libations of whisky served to the gillies; who, heated by these and success, grew noisier and happier, dashing into the water up to their waists, and shouting so that the fish ought to have fled to the lowest depths, as they do when it thunders. Nearly a thousand fish lay heaped upon the beach, and as two carts were driven down, and piled with the spoil, Marchmoram asked Esmé if the cottagers would like them for their supper as well as the milk she had wished for; so the gillies conveyed away and distributed the fish as they listed.

The shadows from the hills were lengthening, and darkening the face of the waters, as the party turned towards the lodge. Glenbenrough was in the height of good humour, but wet and rather chilled, as he had been almost as enthusiastic as the gillies; so when Marchmoram expressed his hopes that dinner might soon be served after their arrival at the lodge, and spoke authoritatively of his not starting until it was over, Glenbenrough acquiesced, without even consulting his daughters; his decision once made there never was any appeal attempted by them.

"Norah, dear Norah," said Esmé, as they again smoothed their hair before the glass in Marchmoram's room, "has it not been charming to-day? We must know these gentlemen better: I feel as if we were perfectly intimate with Mr. Marchmoram already. I am restless to know more of him, so that I may speak to him without any restraint whatever. And Mr. Harold! that slight dreaminess in his eye and smile—did it not take your fancy? I have formed a theory as to his character already, and it is an exalted one. I think you and he would sympathize in some things, Norah."

Norah smiled. "And Mr. Auber! he is so polished and so *observing*, Esmé. You and Ishbel seemed to amuse him: he *is not a man* to be easily interested, though."

These girls did not know that they were speaking of men

who trod in fashion's highest courts, and who in London mixed in the best society. Yet, perhaps, these men would be rather judged thus by first appearances, and with frankness unbiassed as the opinions of children. The slightest praise thus uttered was worth all the adulation of the belles of a season ; for it was genuine, spontaneous, and disinterested.

Ishbel had gathered some bunches of the berries of mountain ash and holly, on their way to Dreumah, and made up three bonnets of bright green and scarlet, which relieved the sombre she herd tartan ; Esmé wore hers fastened with her shawl-brooch on the left shoulder, in the coquettish Highland fashion, but the other girls placed theirs at the waistband. Their seats at dinner were the same as at lunch : Esmé sat next Auber, and Norah by Marchmoram, with Harold on the other side ; Ishbel and Glenbenrough opposite. Auber admired Esmé's piquant bouquet.

"These are the Rowan berries," she said, "and while I wear them no one can bewitch me."

Auber looked at her and saw how innocent was the speech. At the same moment Esmé felt what an exquisite shadowy smile he possessed. They all talked, but less generally than at lunch time ; Harold and Norah thawed in a little mutual reserve of manner towards each other, and favourite authors and many other topics came on the tapis. Marchmoram laughed with little Ishbel, and questioned Glenbenrough, who gave him information on every local point that he desired to know. Auber and Esmé spoke together without interruption. The tone of his voice, and the soft ease of his manner, were inexpressibly bland and soothing, and his low musical laugh made Esmé wish he would laugh again. She found herself speaking more than he did ; for he led the way in question and remark, and paused for a full reply. Whatever it is that constitutes shyness, whether vanity or constitutional feeling, Esmé had none of it ; but at the same time she was equally devoid of any *brusquerie* or hardness of manner. She had no self-consciousness ; her mind outpoured itself through her lips, and she was abstracted as she spoke with artless pleasure, to the polished man of the world, who led her on by interchange of grave and gay remark : it was the first time she had ever been under the influence of the perfect tact of another.

"You seem to have names for yourselves almost as unique as those for your ponies, Miss Mac Neil ?"

Esmé laughed. "My name is Esmé ; Miss Mac Neil is

Norah. We were christened by these names; but Ishbel's proper name is Isabel—we call her Ishbel, as it is the Gaelic for Isabel, and we think it prettier. My dear mother's name was Norah; and as for my name! there were Esmés in our family six hundred years ago: it is a delightfully old name."

"Esmé," Auber repeatedly it musically. "Yes, I could fancy some traditions affixed to that name."

"The name of Esmé came from my maternal grandmother's side of our family; there were ladies and countesses Esmé, in royal courts!" and she involuntarily erected her head a little.

Auber called for a screen, as the turf-fire at his back diffused a too glowing warmth. "The tenacity of life in your Highland peat-fires is wonderful," he remarked. "I have no doubt that bright little fire you kindled at the loch to-day is still reflecting itself in the dark water."

"Fire and water are my favourite elements," Esmé replied. "They are both such beautiful things, and so life inspiring. I have quite a passion for pure springs of water flowing on and refreshing the lips of successive generations for ages. There is a very old well at Glenbenrough, at the foot of a ruined stone cross on the banks of the river, which was consecrated soon after Christianity arrived with the monks from Ireland in the Highlands nearly twelve hundred years ago: I take a drink from it every day."

Marchmoram had talked with Glenbenrough, but he had also heard much of Auber and Esmé's low voiced conversation: his eye also had been studying her face. He now addressed her.

"That well of the cross almost made me thirsty in anticipation, Miss Esmé, as we rowed past it that evening. Your sisters say you haunt it like a spirit!"

"Well, were it a legitimate future existence, I should like to be a water-spirit, Mr. Marchmoram; but then I would not wish to be imprisoned in a well: I would revel in sea and river; in mountain torrents and springs. Descriptions of mermaids always had a charm for me."

Dessert was placed on the table, and a movement made; chairs were placed in a broken circle by the end nearest the fire. Marchmoram sat next Esmé, and Auber moved to the opposite side, betwixt Ishbel and Glenbenrough.

Marchmoram said to Esmé, "I once saw a girl at a ball *dressed as a water-spirit*: by-the-by it was as a Scotch water-spirit too, for she represented Sir Walter Scott's White Lady of Avenel. She had long fair hair like yours, which hung in

heavy tresses past her waist ; her face was pale, and lighted by eyes of lambent blue. Silver beads were strewn in her hair and hung on her white flowing veil and drapery, to represent drops of water. She danced in a Waverley quadrille. I could not discover her name or history : she came and went, to me, as a ghost, for I had never seen her before and have never seen her since. I think I can see her now as I speak, though."

It was now time to start. Farewell must be said to Dreumah. The ponies were neighing at the door : the Glenbenrough cart and men were also in attendance to start in company ; for the moon had not yet risen, and the tract from the lodge, until they should reach the road, was dark and uncertain. The gillies clustered round with flaming torches of pine, snatched out of the fire in their dwelling-place ; and two of the valets also stood at the door with wax lights to illuminate the scene : it was a still dark night. The gentlemen escorted the party a few paces, then farewells were exchanged, and hearty shakes of the hand. Marchmont called out a parting wish for the speedy appearance of the moon, and Esmé looked back and met Auber's dark eye and soft shadowy smile, as he also waved adieu. The moon rose soon after they reached the road, which stretched like a white riband through the dark scenery around them ; and the ponies' hoofs clattered on the rocky surface as they trotted on. The river Rouagh, which they could hear rushing nearly parallel with them on its course from Loch Nightach, now suddenly appeared in sight, sweeping through a ravine, whose steep bank had hitherto kept it out of view. The road spanned it by a one-arch bridge, and the river flowed on smooth and deep until the road again met its course. A gravelly ridge marked a ford, however ; and when this ford was passed the road led on through woods of birch until it forked ; you then might either follow it on for many miles, until it reached the market town of Braemorin, or turn down to the banks of the river again, where a pretty wooden bridge crossed it and led you up to the door of Glenbenrough. As they reached the one-arch stone bridge, the cavalcade stopped for a few moments, and Esmé gazed from her saddle over the parapet. The water boiled in a huge caldron-like pool beneath, and frothed angrily round the black-based rocks : which, shelving lower down, let the water loose, and it flowed on in a broad sullen stream until the ford again shallowed it. There were no trees here, and the pool of the bridge looked gloomy always, but grand in the moonlight.

When the ford was passed, Glenbenrough and Norah were in advance, and they rode on following the road; but Esmé asked Ishbel to take the path which here led up the Rona Pass, and the two girls, alone, and at this late hour of night, wound fearlessly up it, leaving the reins on their ponies' necks. "Ride first, Ishbel, darling," Esmé said; "and don't speak to me, for I wish to think." Esmé had been thinking ever since they left Dreumah; the scenes of the day were flitting in mystic colours between her and the clouds, as she rode on, that night. She was too much given to this dangerous tendency—to recal past scenes, and enact them over again in idea. Hours afterwards, when all was silent and the lights were fled, she would sit and work it out;—repeat the intoxicating conversation (whether it were of love or intellect), adding to it all she would have expressed, but could not, before. Esmé was highly imaginative and of a susceptible temperament, but perfect health and sanguine spirits kept her mind vigorous; though the blood mounted to her brow readily when her feelings were excited, so that any sudden or severe shock to that beating heart of eighteen might have paled the colour in her cheeks for ever. But she was very young: her constitution and her mind would brace with years.

During the summer and autumn months, life at Glenbenrough was enjoyed irregularly (in one sense of the word), and much out of doors. Glenbenrough was active and energetic in his habits; and from the interest he took in his people and estate, he daily walked and drove many a mile through the surrounding straths and glens. In a small library, long converted into his business room, he sat and gave audience to his tenants, and held frequent conference with a factor, who knew less of farming than did the laird himself. There were rarely any morning visitors at Glenbenrough; and as the dinner hour was generally fixed to suit the convenience of their father, the Miss Mac Neils were not bound down to hours, and might extend a ramble or a walk to any length of time they pleased. Norah was passionately fond of gardening; and after her morning household duties were attended to, she generally resorted with rake and spade to the garden, and there worked indefatigably. Ishbel's education was in progress, *but she claimed holiday time while the fine weather lasted, and seldom submitted to longer durance than an hour or two spent at the piano, or in studying French beside Esmé seated in the*

garden ; Esmé being absorbed in some one of her few favourite authors, and a dumb companion for the time.

Then the ponies were within call, and one or other of them was sure to be ridden every day. Esmé would ride to Lochandhu to see Florh, or to gather water lilies ; Norah and Ishbel must pay a visit at the manse, or go to see a patient some miles off : the latter was a duty which Norah never neglected, and which was a very necessary one. Norah's small skill in medicine was supernatural in its effects as compared with what the ignorant practice of the patient's friends might have been. She heard that a child was ill, and on riding to the bothie where it lay, she found it lying beneath heaps of plaids and blankets, with head and pulse throbbing in fever, the mother and father seated by a huge turf fire lamenting its inevitable death. Norah asked if they had given anything to the child. " Nothing but the drop whisky to keep the sickness from his heart." Whisky was the universal cure—and curse ; and though Norah argued, and exemplified the good effects of an opposite treatment with success, yet if another child in the same family fell ill, they tried whisky again ; and did not Norah again interpose, no other prescription would be given. The three sisters seldom required medical *surveillance* for themselves ; the healthy life of exercise in the open air which they led in summer, made their eyes bright and their steps elastic all the year round.

When the snows of winter came, their out-door life perforce altered. The hills lay deep in their untrodden snow ; and even the roads were dangerous, from their icy slipperiness, to the shaggy ponies in their rough winter coats. The brown stacks of peat were piled high, and cart loads carried daily to the house from the square (as the farm offices and stables are designated in Scotland) ; for blazings fires kept up in each and every grate. Books, and work, and the piano occupied stated hours ; the former selected from the old library downstairs, with, at rare intervals, a new selection ordered from London, or borrowed from friends : they had no reviews, to enable them to skim a book and to talk of it superficially afterwards. Their reading was literal, and they reviewed the work amongst themselves with individual criticism or discussion ; and sometimes when a Review fell later into their hands, it was delightful to see their judgment often there forestalled.

Norah and Ishbel worked usefully as they sat in the drawing-room on wintry days ; many warm flannel petticoats and dresses

were made for poor children and old women of the glens. Esmé was no worker, but she helped at the simpler parts of garments, or sat at the piano, discoursing music to the others as they sat at work. She did not play brilliantly, but after a method of her own, and her pieces were various and desultory in arrangement: airs from the operas and ancient masters, wild Gaelic laments and stirring pibrochs alternating with German marches and vales. Her music-books were untidy with pencilled writing, and astounding to a professional teacher would have appeared the passionate words written beneath the passages expressing pianissimo or fortissimo.

Mrs. Mac Neil had carried on the education of her daughters, with a quiet love and duty, until Esmé reached her eleventh or twelfth year; and then her health began to fail. She wrote to friends in the south, who sent a good Protestant German governess to Glenbenrough; and soon after, resigning her children to the care of their governess, Mrs. Mac Neil gently bade farewell to them, to her husband, and all else so dear to her below, and fled away to the untroubled regions beyond. She had been a devoted, amiable woman, loved and loving in her generation; and though transplanted from a Lowland home to a Highland soil, the people had never felt her to be alien. It was she who built the first proprietary school in that district, and set the example of a cultivated mind and refined habits to many neighbouring homes. Mademoiselle Backhacker remained as governess until Norah had reached her eighteenth year, about two years previously; and then, with longing steps, she retraced her way home again to the beloved Vaterland: the history and language of which she had thoroughly taught to her pupils; as also French, but no other accomplishment. She was a good, simple woman, very indulgent; but her influence had had little part in the formation of her pupils' character. Perhaps her superstition and German idiosyncrasy had been of a slightly dangerous tendency in connection with Esmé's imaginative bias.

CHAPTER V.

THE BARN BALL.

We'll bring down the track deer,
 We'll bring down the black steer';
 The lamb from the bracken,
 And doe from the glen;
 The salt sea we'll harry;
 And bring to our Charlie
 The cream from the bothie,
 And curd from the pen.—MAC LEAN'S WELCOME.

STRATHSHIELIE, the large substantial mansion-house of Sir Alastair Mac Neil, one of the chieftains of the clan, and first cousin of Mac Neil of Glenbenrough, lay about fifteen miles from the latter place. His rental and estate nearly doubled those of Glenbenrough, and he showed corresponding hospitality. Merry were the Christmas parties at Strathshielie, and extensive the autumn battues; the former held in the good old Highland fashion, the latter so as to delight the English sportsmen. There were two sons and two daughters of Strathshielie; the former both in the army, and in the same fine Highland regiment, but at home on leave just now; the two daughters, Marion and Julia, were lately returned from an English school. The two families were closely intimate, and Sir Alastair and Lady Mac Neil with the young people were expected on a few days' visit to Glenbenrough; they were to arrive on the third day after the party had taken place at Dreumah, and the girls were thinking of plans of amusement for their cousins.

"Do let us have a barn ball on the 30th," cried Ishbel. "It is Esmé's birthday, for one reason, and we might not be at home when the harvest-home takes place: besides, we are much more likely to catch cold later in the season, as we did last year. Marion and Julia have not been at a barn ball for two years, so this one would be news for their next letters to English school friends."

"Well, you can ask papa," Norah replied.

"And he must ask the gentlemen from Dreumah!" Esmé exclaimed.

"Oh, yes; what fun to see them dance reels!" exclaimed Ishbel; and she flew down the stairs three steps at a time, to Glenbenrough's business room.

A few hours later, a message was sent to the Grieve (an important personage with the laird, as he has charge of the home farm and servants, and also exercises a sort of general surveillance), whose house was at "the square," desiring him to issue invitations to a dance at the barn on the 30th, in honour of Miss Esmé's birthday. Norah wrote notes to Dr. and Mrs. Macconochie, the parish minister and his wife; to Mr. Macpherson of Phee, and a maiden niece of middle age who lived with him; and to the factor, Mr. Campbell—these being all near neighbours—desiring the pleasure of their company at dinner on the 30th. A note was also despatched to Dreumah, with an invitation from Glenbenrough to the three gentlemen, appointing a rendezvous in one of the birch woods on the banks of the river below the house, at twelve o'clock on that day, when a battue for roe and black game should take place, and the party would adjourn to dinner at Glenbenrough afterwards. All these invitations were universally accepted.

Next day a carriage and dog-cart arrived with the whole family of Strathshielie. Glenbenrough and his three daughters were standing on the hall-steps as they drove up, and there was quite a clamour of welcome and kisses exchanged with cousins of both sexes, when they alighted. Sir Alastair, a strong, stout man, with a rubicund colour and hair of reddish hue, wrapped in a shepherd-plaid, was seated in the rumble with a tall military looking man, who descended with a stiff gouty gait, and whom he introduced as Colonel Sternbotham. Mrs. Sternbotham, a tall thin woman, was handed out, and swept an Elizabethan bow to Glenbenrough and the girls. Lady Mac Neil, Marion, and Julia, stepped out after her: the mother, a stout, good-humoured looking woman; not unlike Sir Alastair in jollity of appearance, and her daughters nice looking girls, tall, and with auburn hair and bright hazel eyes. They were dressed in shepherd tartan like their cousins, but wore fashionable little bonnets. The two sons, Roderick and Patrick Mac Neil, occupied the dog-cart,—fine stalwart young men, dressed in kilts of their regimental colours, with thick green jackets to suit. The whole party stood on the steps until the luggage was fairly unpacked, and the carriages moved off to the square. Then they were ushered in, Glenbenrough leading the way with Lady Mac Neil and Mrs. Sternbotham.

Sir Alastair detained Norah a moment, telling her that the Sternbothams had arrived at Strathshielie a few days previously. The colonel was an Englishman, with a fine old place, his wife

a distant relative of Lady Mac Neil ; they were making a tour in Scotland, and had diverged to Strathshielie for a short visit. "My dear," said Sir Alastair, "don't let them see too much of our Highland spirits (I mean both liquid and natural) ; for they are great disciplinarians," he added, as he darted up the stairs after the others.

Lunch was ready, and the whole party sat down without further delay.

"Dear girls, why did you not wear you wideawakes ?" cried Esmé as she rushed from Marion to Julia, unloosening the ribbons of their bonnets.

"Hush," they whispered, looking with dismay towards the colonel. A slight air of restraint seemed to repress the spirits of the Strathshielie party ; the girls of Glenbenrough felt its influence also ; Lady Mac Neil's usual loud merry laugh was not heard, and every one seemed to feel an anxiety on the score of politeness. Colonel Sternbotham, however, talked very agreeably, describing his tour, and appealing to his wife to verify points of time or distance ; while she silently formed a small circle of listeners.

Lunch over, Norah proposed showing the lady guests their rooms, while the gentlemen all left the house for a visit to the farm ; Colonel Sternbotham being anxious for comparisons of the Scotch and English soils. Mrs. Sternbotham was scarcely in her room, her severe looking old Abigail in attendance, when Lady Mac Neil rushed from hers and joined her daughters and the other girls in the drawing-room.

"Oh, my dears," she exclaimed, taking Norah's hand ; "you have no idea of the criticism we are all subjected to ! This is the very stiffest couple imaginable : Colonel Sternbotham is quite an absurd old martinet. He never was in the Highlands before, and not in the least understanding our ways, he makes no allowances ; but even in England I believe he is the dread of his neighbourhood : he keeps up such strict discipline and etiquette in his establishment. His wife, my cousin, was a nice, timid young schoolgirl, when he married her, on his retirement from the army, and he brought her completely under his governance. They have no family, fortunately, or they would be brought up to perpetuate his system of social drill !"

"Yes," exclaimed Marion and Julia ; "fancy, we were afraid to wear our wideawakes to-day, and dared not propose mounting the driving-seat ; though being in a close carriage makes

us ill, and we could not enjoy the views of scenery from the inside."

"But, dear Lady Mac Neil," asked Ishbel, dolefully; "must we have no fun? We wanted to have had all sorts of fun!"

"Yes, yes, dear child; you need not debar yourselves from any amusement: Colonel Sternbotham is not at all an unkind man, only very particular."

"You shall hear me astonish him," whispered Esmé, laughing, to her cousin Marion.

Norah went to the door of Mrs. Sternbotham's room and proposed a walk, to which she assented, and with Lady Mac Neil and the five girls presently set out. Norah led them through the garden, and on the river banks they found all the gentlemen assembled; so they rambled on *en masse*. The scenery was looking most beautiful, and Colonel Sternbotham really seemed delighted and pleased with everything. Glenbenrough thought him agreeable, and, in his own simple-heartedness, discovered no pedantry or formality in his guest. Dinner was at six o'clock, and served punctually, and when dessert was placed on the table, Glenbenrough informed the young men of the intended battue on the morrow. He knew that Sir Alastair seldom shot now-a-days, but he hoped the colonel would certainly try the roe. The colonel, however, shook his head, and pointed to his gouty foot; he would prefer a ramble with the ladies.

"What are the names of the Dreumah men?" Sir Alastair asked.

On hearing them, the colonel pricked up his ears. "I have met both Auber and Marchmoram in town," he said; "the former is an *habitué* of the Travellers', and a most polished, agreeable man. Harold also I have met in the hunting-field in Warwickshire: he is a man of very good connections." The colonel looked elated to hear there was such respectable society in the vicinity.

The gentlemen soon rejoined the ladies in the drawing-room; and, after tea, Norah and Esmé played some duets; Lady Mac Neil and Mrs. Sternbotham sat and knitted; the colonel looking, in silence, over a book of engravings, and bestowing a smile or an occasional nod of applause to the performers on the piano. Ishbel approached her father, and whispered a long sentence in his ear; the moment she ceased, he exclaimed:

"Certainly, my dear, by all means, the very thing: w!

not?" and he rang the bell vigorously, when Cameron, the old butler, appeared. "Send for the piper, and have these tables moved," and he suited the action to the word. Roderick and Patrick Mac Neil cleared the centre of the room in a moment. "We are going to show you a reel, colonel," said Glenbenrough. "My young people are all fond of dancing!"

"Yes, indeed," exclaimed Esmé, rising from the piano. "Marion and Julia, you must get into practice in Thulighans to-night, so that you may not disgrace the clan to-morrow."

Colonel Sternbotham smiled grimly, and looked for explanation.

"Papa is going to give the people a dance to-morrow evening in the barn," Norah said. "It is a pleasure often given at this season in the Highlands, and then we all go and mix for an hour or two with them. I think you will be amused by the scene."

"Ah, indeed! And pray what dances are in vogue? Reels, and what else? Are you expected to dance with the young men of the lower classes?"

"Oh yes!" replied Esmé. "Reels are the National dance; but there is another dance in great vogue, called Pease Straw."

"Really—and what style of dance is that? a grave or a gay measure?"

"The latter, rather. The air is sprightly, and the figure familiar. A man takes his pocket-handkerchief and dances a solo sort of shuffle in the centre of a circle formed by all the other people. Suddenly he twists his handkerchief round the neck of his chosen fair, and draws her by it into the centre, when he salutes her; then, releasing her, he leaves the handkerchief in her hand, and she takes her place in the dancing circle. She then dances vigorously by herself until her choice is made, when she also lassoes her chosen beau, and leaving the handkerchief with him, the dance goes on until 'Ilka laddie's chose his lassie, and ilka lassie's ta'en her Joe.' You must dance first with the Grieve's wife, Colonel Sternbotham."

The colonel started to his feet. "Never!" he almost shouted, grasping the back of Mrs. Sternbotham's chair.

"Of course I did not mean in Pease Straw," Esmé said quietly. "Although I have described it to you, none of us have ever seen it: it is only danced at the close of the evening."

A shriek from the bagpipes precluded all further remark: the piper had arrived, and stood at the head of the drawing-room stairs. 'Midst the fearful discordance of tuning, Sir Alastair

and Norah, Glenbenrough and Marion, Roderick and Esmé, Patrick and Ishbel stood up, forming two sets; the pipes burst forth into the inspiring reel of Thulighan, the piper blowing with dilated eyes and distended cheeks, and keeping time with measured beat of foot.

It is a wild and graceful dance when danced as it then was. The four men in their kilts clapped hands, and danced in rivalry of fantastic steps before each other; then, with strong but not ungentle arm, grappled and whirled round; the girls in the centre of them entwined their arms, and round they flew with floating dresses. Sir Alastair and Glenbenrough danced with sparkling eye, and with bearing as erect as the younger men: they threw off half their years as the pipes played the dear familiar strain, and seemed scarcely to feel the ground beneath them; they cracked their fingers, and strained every muscle of their limbs. Lady Mac Neil felt young herself as she watched her husband, mentally following every step and gesture.

At last the reaction came, and with an abrupt gasp of the pipes, and a laugh on every face, the reels ceased, and the dancers sank into various attitudes of exhaustion on chairs and sofas: Marion and Julia declared they could dance no longer. The piper doffed his plumed bonnet, and, bowing, waved his hand to all the company: he then retreated downstairs, and faint sounds of the pipes came continuously for an hour afterwards from the culinary region: the servants were also practising for the morrow evening.

"Let us play at Consequences, papa," Norah at last said; "it will give us time to cool. Do you know the game of Consequences, Mrs. Sternbotham?"

Mrs. Sternbotham glanced at the colonel as she answered in the affirmative. The colonel had seen the game played, but never had joined in it; however, as this was only a small family party, he might unbend. He therefore joined the merry circle; his wife sat by his side to play propriety. Laughably absurd were the couplings of sayings and doings. Sir Alastair shouted to find himself eloping with Lola Montes; and Lady Mac Neil was almost disconcerted to find that her opinion of Glenbenrough was the very worst possible. At last the paper unfolded a scene. Esmé read aloud with stifled laughter—

"The personages Colonel Sternbotham and the Minister's Wife.

Occupation Dancing Pease Straw.

The gentleman said.....Is this a rational amusement?

The lady repliedDance your steps, man! dance your steps!

The world's opinion ...They are an ill-assorted pair.
*And the Consequences...*She falls down and breaks her leg, and he retires to a monastery."

Next morning, the 30th of August, the sun rose as brightly as on the 25th; it was a lovely sunny day, the air slightly tempered by an early autumn feeling, which, in that clear bracing atmosphere, raised the spirits. Roderick and Patrick Mac Neil whistled cheerily as they shouldered their guns for starting. Glenbenrough was also going, and a staff of beaters, for the roe woods. Just as they all moved off, some of the Dreumah gillies arrived bearing luggage, Marchmoram having this time sent on changes of dress to Glenbenrough; the Dreumah party had already arrived at the sporting rendezvous, about two miles from the house beneath the wooden bridge.

Lady Mac Neil and Mrs. Sternbotham remained within doors until lunch time, and, after that, took a stroll through the garden. The girls divided into parties; Norah and Marion walked to the square, where the former gave some directions to the Grieve as to making the barn comfortable; Julia, Esmé, and Ishbel unmoored the boat and paddled down the river. The afternoon was closing as they returned, and shots were echoing along the banks, which showed the sportsmen were also wending homewards. Norah, on her return from the square, had gone part of the way up the Roua Pass, to seek for a bed of green deer's-grass, which there spread thickly over the surface of the hill; while she pulled it up carefully with its long tendrils, Marion Mac Neil beat down bunches of bright red berries from the rowan-tree; then they sat down in the heather, and Norah made wreaths of the deer's-grass twined light and thick, with little clusters of red rowan berries at intervals to relieve the green. The five girls all entered the drawing-room together, and they formed a picturesque bevy. Marion and Julia wore high white muslin dresses, with bows of royal Stuart tartan. This is the only legitimate tartan for universal use: in the Highlands no one would generally wear the tartan of another clan; but, if a change was wished, the royal might be assumed for the time. Norah, Esmé, and Ishbel wore dresses equally piquant and peculiar,—skirts of a glossy linen, in stripes of gray and scarlet, with loose black velvet jackets, showing the bodice beneath, and stockings of Rob Roy pattern in spun silk. The natural wreaths, which all the girls wore, seemed to suit equally well the various shades of hair, in auburn, brown, and gold.

Dr. and Mrs. Macconochie were now announced, and the colonel slightly reddened as he saw in the minister's honest wife his absurd companion in the game of Consequences of the evening before; and when, in answer to his frigid bow on introduction, she rushed forward and shook him heartily by the hand, his confusion became evident. Mr. Macpherson of Phee, his niece Miss Christy, and Mr. Campbell, the factor, arrived in a dog-cart, and entered simultaneously. Miss Christy Macpherson was a raw built person like her uncle, with a large sun-burnt face and high cheek-bones; her mouth, extending into a wide grin, showed a set of huge white teeth, and she spread her hands over her knees while she sat, or used them in strong gesticulation when she spoke. The minister's wife was attired in black sik, and a tidy cap trimmed with white ribands. She was a stout and rather comely woman, and being duly impressed with a sense of her rights as wife of the parish presbyter, she would not have felt timidity in any society whatsoever. Miss Christy Macpherson was a character: an excellent kind-hearted woman, shrewd in Scotch sense, and utterly unaware of any phases of conventionality: refinement must shrink before her, and pretence she actually killed. She lived with Macpherson of Phee, her uncle, who, with her father, and their forbears, had held the lands of Phee in tenancy for many generations; and she boasted of her personal labours in the poultry-yard and dairy. Miss Christy's dress was more peculiar than that of the girls of Glenbenrough; the waist was short and the skirt scanty; but its value was precious in her eyes, it having been her mother's wedding slip, only dyed brown twenty years ago. She wore a cap which also formed a weekly frontispiece for her Sunday bonnet; and a faded silk scarf, of Macpherson tartan, was pinned on either shoulder.

The five daughters of Clan Mac Neil might have challenged admiration anywhere. There is an intuitive self-possession and graceful manner inherent in the west coast female blood of the Highlands: I never yet saw a west coast girl who did not carry her head gracefully on entering a room, or one who stood awkwardly abashed amongst strangers in quiet dignity. I have seen a young girl, wearing white kid gloves for the first time in her life—whose foot had never before trod beyond the wilds of Kintail, and whose ear had seldom listened to other music than Gaelic songs on the hills, or the scream of the bagpipe *at a Highland wedding*—enter with a fashionable party an *Inverness ball-room*, and with head gracefully erect, her dark

eyes calmly gazing around, take her place and move with quiet ease through quadrilles in the midst of a dazzling crowd.

The introductions over, many questions arose as to the sport of the day. The six guns had killed five roe and thirty brace of black game, besides minor game.

"Oh, our dear black cocks!" exclaimed Ishbel, "what slaughter! The only comfort is that you are not likely to shoot so many again this season. By-and-by they will outwit you, and you will have to go stalking them like deer."

Auber now approached Esmé, who was seated by Miss Christy Macpherson. He bent low, and glancing from face to face, asked the name and history of each individual; Esmé replying graphically, in a low pitched voice. At last he pointed out Colonel Sternbotham.

"That is an old English colonel who came from Strathshielie yesterday. His wife is a cousin of Lady Mac Neil's; but he never was in the Highlands before. His name? Colonel Sternbotham!"

"Sternbotham!" shouted Miss Christy. "Eh, loch me! his name is no decent! whatan's a name!" The colonel turned sharply round.

Esmé could not look up; her lip quivered and she felt as though the colonel was in danger of apoplexy from the shock: but not a muscle had moved in Auber's face.

Dinner was announced. Sir Alastair sat at Norah's right hand, at the head of the table, and Harold, who had escorted Julia Mac Neil, sat on her left; Esmé being placed betwixt Marchmoram and Miss Macpherson. Colonel Sternbotham unfortunately found himself on the right of the latter lady. Auber sat between Lady Mac Neil and Marion, and Esmé saw that he talked assiduously to both during dinner: he always made himself agreeable. The mingled hum of Scotch and English accents was striking; as also was the contrast between the huge red hands of Miss Christy, and the thin, pale jewelled ones of Mrs. Colonel Sternbotham. Marchmoram questioned Esmé about the company, as Auber had done, and she answered him with greater vivacity. She sketched her kind cousins, Sir Alastair and Lady Mac Neil, and the family fo Strathshielie, in few and loving words; then touched with mimicry on Colonel Sternbotham, and excused Miss Christy's eccentricities on the score of her genuine character. Miss Christy had *manfully* addressed the colonel the moment she *sat down*; but he answered in abrupt monosyllables: never had

he sat in society with a woman like this. But Christy, wholly unconscious, talked on and fairly carried him by storm, till at last he was heard talking of Edinburgh to her.

"Aye, aye: it's a bonny toun. But what thought ye o' Arthur's seat? Throth he was lazy to need a seat when he got to the top o' a mere brae like yon! I told them it was jist rough ground only, compared to our hills here. The thing that pleased me most in a' the sights was the picter show. Ye were in Edinburgh yon time, did ye see it?"

She had caught the colonel here, for he was an amateur in painting, and he discussed some of the pictures there.

"Did ye notice a cattle picter? The horns on the beast, I could hae grasped them! It was my choice of them all."

"Was that a Cuy?"

"No; I am thinking it was a heifer," said poor Christy.

Marchmoram asked Esmé what stay the Strathshielie party intended making. She replied that Sir Alastair and Lady Mac Neil, and the Sternbothams were to leave the day after next; but that Marion and Julia would remain some time longer at Glenbenrough.

"Then you must take them to see Dreumah again," Marchmoram replied. "I saw no water-lilies in the drawing-room to-day. Have you ceased to visit Lochandhu?"

"Oh, no," replied Esmé, smiling; "but I have had no time since the day we were at Dreumah. I think I shall run away for an hour to-morrow and go for a supply: they are in such full flower just now. I am always in hope of seeing one of the beautiful lilies in the act of dying: it is so lovely a flower death. When the seed ripens in the lily cup, and her bloom is over, she does not cast the seed to the winds and fade, wither, and decay, like earth flowers; but she slowly turns upon her pale face, and rests it upon the water, while the seeds sink in a golden shower back to the parent stem, far beneath the water: thus they never leave their native loch, but flower there for ever."

"Well, that is a pretty idea. There is patriotism and dignity in that death!"

"Have you ever noticed the holly? You know how luxuriantly it grows wild here—quite tall trees. They are the fierce dark green hollies, with prickles like steel; the base of the tree is a perfect armoury of sharp points, but as the *branches* spring higher, the prickles decrease, and the top *branches*, which are beyond our reach, have no prickles at

THE BARN BALL.

all. Is not this nature's economy? She only protects where necessary, and crowns strength with beauty."

"That suits me, Miss Esmé," Marchmoram said, looking strangely at her, and he quoted a stanza of Southey's beautiful lines on "The Holly Tree," with a touching earnestness that affected her deeply. He then continued—"What a beautiful evergreen the holly is, especially among the dark rocks! How exquisitely nature chooses and plants her foliage. You have no stately oaks here, or beeches on gigantic scale; they would add no grandeur, and look but heavy, massed 'gainst rock and hill. They are wanted for our English soil, to give character to our sweeping plains and vales, and they are our boast as the rocks are yours. But here beauty comes in the shape of tender weeping birches, wild red cherry trees, and hardy mountain ash; their light colouring and foliage blending with the rugged scenery in the full beauty of harmonious contrast."

"Yes, Mr. Marchmoram! The brilliant colouring of the Highland autumn,—does it not strike you? There is such variety of tint in the natural woods; and then the hills!—purple heather, with green and amber ferns, and rock of every hue, from violet to gray; overarched with skies of such ethereal blue! I have read that the blue in the Highland sky is different to that of any other: it is a cold light blue, but so rare and transparent."

"I have never seen the Highlands in winter; and I know not that I ever shall," Marchmoram replied: "can't you describe them to me?"

"I will try," replied Esmé, earnestly. "You know the pines here predominate in foliage during the winter. When ——" but here Norah and Lady Mac Neil made the move to retire, and the sentence remained unfinished.

At nine o'clock the gentlemen all appeared in the drawing-room; the Highlanders of the party all in high spirits: Dr. Macconochie cracked his fingers, gambolling like a bear, before his wife; and Macpherson of Phee retreated to the hall to put on his plaid, whistling, "Up, let's to the wedding." Cloaks and shawls were brought, and all the carriages were in requisition; but there were no horses: the lads of Glenbenrough always drew the laird's party to a scene like the present. Every one was in high spirits, and Marchmoram and Harold were quite excited; their laughing cheers mingling with the yells of the men drawing the carriages, and the shouts and

whoops of the other guests. Auber seemed exceedingly amused with the start, and the prospects of the evening's novelty.

The barn was very large, the floor smoothly planked and level with the ground. Chandeliers, formed of fresh green branches, hung from the black rafters at intervals, innumerable tallow candles burning amongst the garnishing of leaves. A wattling of green birch extended across the upper end of the barn; having candles and oil lamps ranged on the top of it. Chairs were placed before this wattling for the ladies; and two rows of deal forms, borrowed from the school-houses and farms, extended the whole length of both sides. Three barrels, reversed, and covered with plaids, having a stool placed on the top of each, formed the orchestra; which was occupied by two fiddlers and a performer on the double bass. The piper stood next them, immovable, with the pipes under his arm, ready to change the tune or music at a moment's warning. The door-way was ornamented by an arch of evergreens and heather, and branches of birch and holly were everywhere fastened above the rafters and on the walls, which were of rough clay. Upwards of a hundred country people were seated around, and a large band of old and young men stood at the door to receive the party from the house. As the carriages were drawn up, the people who drew them, and those at the door, uttered a shout of Gaelic welcome, which was echoed by all the occupants of the ball-room; and when Glenbenrough entered with Lady Mac Neil, ushered by the Grieve and upper farm servants, there were vociferous shouts of welcome.

The pipes then blew out loud and long; and Glenbenrough making a signal to the Grieve, that functionary uttered a short sentence in Gaelic; whereupon there was a shuffling of feet amongst the sitters, and couples rose by dozens, soon forming reels all the length of the room. Many of the men were in Highland dresses, and a few had ornaments in dirks and brooches; almost all the others wore thick blue dresses of home-spun manufacture, or gray coats and trousers: but they all were well and decently dressed. There were many very handsome young men, with bright glowing colours and sparkling eyes, in whom the volatile Celtic blood preponderated; but there were also heavy figures with slouching gait and stupid faces, low-browed and vacant—the indolence of Celtic sloth evident in them. The women, too, were very diverse in appearance; *some being positively hideous; their complexions weather-beaten and wrinkled, their figures flat and ungainly; not a*

redeeming point about them : even youth seemed wanting, for they had no bloom whatsoever ; but again the eye fell upon a cluster of tall, handsome girls, with erect bearing and bright, intelligent glances. The women were dressed according to their position : the unmarried generally in their Sunday cotton gowns, with muslin collars, and perhaps the ornament of a bow of riband ; the married, with gowns of tartan or merino, a small shawl or handkerchief generally pinned with a silver brooch, and almost all with the high matron mutch, which concealed their abundant hair as effectually as a nun's coif might do. There is no charm which the Highland girls prize more than a fine head of hair ; and in maidenhood no time is spared in setting it off to the best advantage, on the Sabbath morn especially ; for to have the glossiest head in kirk is no slight ambition to them. But the moment the wedding-ring is put on, the high structure in muslin and pasteboard which forms the matron cap, is also assumed, and the hair is seen no more : frequently, indeed, for the sake of coolness, they cut off the back part, and merely leave the bands, which are seen at the front.

Some of the young men danced capitably in the reel, and with figures as erect as a tree ; but none of the women danced gracefully ; even those who looked best when standing or sitting, seemed to dance awkwardly : they had no method, but gave little runs from side to side, or bobbed straight up and down before their partners. A second reel was formed, and Glenbenrough and Mrs. Macconochie stood up. Miss Christy seized upon the Grieve, the factor and Macpherson of Phee made simultaneous bows to Marion and Julia Mac Neil, and Ishbel darted off with her cousin Roderick, touching Harold as she passed, and exclaiming, "Follow us with Norah, we shall wait for you at the end of the barn." Norah held out her hand, with a smile, to Harold. "Come," she said ; "you will find you can dance reels by inspiration : you only require to be very active." The pipes set up the preliminary drone, Ishbel beckoned frantically, and Harold found himself actually running, pulling Norah along with him, to their reserved places at the end of the room. The ball had begun, the people were warming, and the second reel was kept up with sustained vigour : such a shuffling of feet and cracking of fingers ; some with a broad grin of delight, others, with grave stolidity, making a business of the pleasure. The shouts and whoops grew loud and frequent, and the steps redoubled in swiftness and energy.

Occasionally a man seized the hands of his partner, and sawed her up and down, as it were, before him; or, in taking the grand round in the reel, he would give a loud clap to the shoulders in advance, in sign of amicable encouragement.

The reels now progressed in rapid succession. The five Miss Mac Neils were in constant requisition, being expected to dance with all who might claim the honour the young men generally bowing low, and silently waiting for acceptance; but the old men of the glens, going up with some expression of homely endearment in Gaelic, would lead them away, holding their hand, or arm, in a triumphant grasp. Harold scarcely sat down after his initiatory reel; for the second, Ishbel led him up to the parish schoolmaster's wife, a good woman who could scarcely speak the English tongue; he asked her daughter to dance with him a third; and so on he went, heartily enjoying the capital exercise. Marchmoram and Auber mixed and moved through the scene, but did not join in the reels. They were both standing at the upper end of the barn, when Miss Christy approached, gesticulating in haste, her eye glancing along the seats.

"Hiest ye, hiest ye!" she exclaimed. "The laird's waiting for a couple till dance, fornent him. Colonel, ye'll do fine!" and she grasped Colonel Sternbotham by his arm. She waited for no reply or demonstration of refusal; but literally dragged him off. The pipes struck up—his voice was lost in the din, and he arrived, breathless with surprise and indignation, where Glenbenrough was already dancing. Miss Christy jostled him before her: he was to be her partner. She caught hold of his hands, and calling out "Hie, hie!" with masculine enthusiasm began the sawing motion previously described. It was all accomplished in a few moments; but Esmé, who was standing near, saw the scene, sprang forward, and, releasing Colonel Sternbotham, substituted Ewen Mackenzie, with whom she had been about to dance.

"Well, Miss Esmé, that was a gallant rescue on your part. I could not have ventured to dispute a prey with that strong lady."

"Wasn't it absurd, Mr. Marchmoram? I think I must ask Colonel Sternbotham if he and Mrs. Sternbotham would not soon like to retire to the house. *You* are not tired of this yet, are you?"

"No, not in the least: why, I have not even danced. I *have tried a little* conversation, but I find the English tongue

not favourable to it. They almost all seem to speak Gaelic only; and those who try English don't make it very intelligible."

"No, there is no masculine in the Gaelic language; at least, they never translate it in speaking English: and if you asked even about the state of the weather, they would likely answer, 'She is a fine day.'"

Marchmoram laughed, as he answered, "Your remark reminds me of such an *apropos* absurdity. There was a huge black-bearded man seated in that direction a little while ago: there, I see him now. He had his arm rather affectionately placed round the waist of the slim little woman beside him; and, as I wondered if it was connubial or not, I asked him if he was a married man. He stared, and answered in stentorian voice, 'No, I am a Maa-ed man!' Fancy such a bachelor so profaning the sweet term of maid."

Esmé could not help laughing, though she wished her poor countryman had not made such a fool of himself. She asked Marchmoram if he was not struck with the difference in personal appearance amongst the women present.

"Yes, Auber and I especially noticed it; and we think the girls dispersed so few and far over the Dreumah country are more generally pretty than the *tout ensemble* here to-night. Some of these women are unfortunately plain."

"Well, the two classes of plain and pretty in the Highlands divide very equally into agricultural and pastoral. I could point out the *locale* of the different women here almost from their appearance. Those old looking, weather-beaten women sitting on the other side, with their huge hands and ungainly figures, are all the sisters or wives of crofters; or they work as farm servants to the small arable tenants. They labour quite as hard as the men, and are exposed almost as much to the weather; they drive carts and load them, reap the corn, till the ground, and work from morning till night; they are ill fed, and lose all bloom and freshness at an early age. Those tall, erect women there, in a group, come from the hills beyond Dual Ghu, where herds of cattle feed on natural grass, and the goats scramble in flocks amongst the rocks; they make butter and cheese in their open-air dairies in summer, and spin the wool of their sheep in winter, and so have no rude labour to degrade them. All the country about Dreumah, not devoted to the deer, feeds only sheep and black cattle, so the people there are pastoral in appearance."

Company now ceased dancing, and filed to the sides of the barn, as the Grieve now emerged from a side door with a large kettle in one hand and a glass in the other, two men following carrying plates of oat-cake. He approached Glenbenrough, and poured out a bumper of hot whisky toddy; other attendants appeared in succession, also carrying kettles, jugs, and glasses. Glenbenrough advanced to the centre, and then, uttering distinctly a few sentences, in Gaelic, of good-will and welcome to his people, quaffed off his bumper. A loud buzz and murmur ran round the room, as an old man, with long white hair and dressed in a suit of dark blue woollen, now advanced and, holding a glass full above his head, paused while glasses were filled round. He then with great gesticulation made a speech in Gaelic, and, clasping Glenbenrough's hand with one of his, turned and called out the Gaelic signal, at a toast, of "Neish, neish, neish!" (now, now, now). The words were repeated with magic celerity by all the men, and then followed a burst of cheering, as they all drank to the clan of Mac Neil and the roof-tree of Glenbenrough. The excitement increased and subsided, then increased for several minutes. Some of the old men sprang forward and shook their beloved laird's hand; and exclamations in Gaelic and English continued, until all the people present had emptied their glasses: about a dozen of the latter doing duty for the whole company.

Colonel Sternbotham saw Miss Christy drain off a glass-full, after three kilted men had just had the same glass at their lips. Miss Christy catching his eye in a glare of appalled interrogation, winked and nodded amicably to him from the distance. The colonel, shocked and disgusted, shut his eyes.

"Whisky toddy will now make frequent circuit," Esmé said to Marchmoram; "there will be rounds after every few reels."

She rose and went towards Norah, who was standing near the door with Lady Mac Neil and her cousins, and whispered a few words. Norah nodded, and Esmé stepped through the crowd of country people and went out at the door into the open air.

CHAPTER VI.

HIGHLAND CHARACTERISTICS.

My golden flagons I would fill
 With rosy draughts from every hill.
 My gay companions should prolong
 The feast, the revel, and the song
 To many a sportive hour.—CAMPBELL.

It was a still and lovely night, the moon shining in harvest brightness, and the pure cool air was a delightful change from the heated atmosphere of the barn, where the odours of peat smoke from homely garments, and the fumes of hot toddy were now becoming perceptible. The moonlight was brightening with its mellow radiance the grand scenery around, rocks and trees casting dark shadows that made the light appear more brilliant. The sound of the pipes and the shouts of the dancers came subdued on the open air as Esmé moved on to the road, and stood still for an instant. A step was heard, and Auber stood beside her.

"Where are you going, Miss Esmé? You passed me like a ghost, as I stood without just now, also admiring this Highland moon."

"I am going to the house to see if supper is ready, as Norah thinks Mrs. Sternbotham and Lady Mac Neil are tired," she replied; "and I shall tell Cameron to come and announce it as soon as possible. Do not come with me, for I must run."

"And do you think I can't run, too, Miss Esmé?" asked Auber, laughing. "Let us try who'll win the race."

"Well—off!" Esmé laughed, and bounded forward like a young deer. They passed Florh with her son Huistan, the shepherd, who were coming thus late to the ball, from Loch-andhu, and had just descended the Roua Pass. Florh turned and looked after Esmé and Auber flying side by side in the moonlight. She spoke in Gaelic to Huistan.

"Where gaes my young roe with yon English fallow buck?"

"Not far, ye may be sure, mither," Huistan replied: "its pretty rinnin'."

"I dinna like the match." Florh said, drily. "Let us gae on to the dance."

Auber's gallantry would not allow him to beat Esmé, and they reached the hall door together. Not many minutes after she re-appeared at the open door.

"Good old Cameron promises to announce supper in half-an-hour, Mr. Auber, so I shall return to tell Norah now."

As they advanced, Auber suddenly started, and drew Esmé back by her arm, as an unearthly-looking spectre appeared in the path before them. Leaning against the trunk of a tall fir-tree, with head thrust forward as if intently listening, appeared a gigantic half-naked man, who waved them back with furious gestures. His face was gray and gaunt, and masses of coarse red hair hung matted to his shoulders; his naked brawny legs, covered with reddish hair, straddled Colossus-like in the moonlight. With his right hand he wielded a large gleaming hammer, and with the other he held together a grimy smoke-stained blanket, which formed his principal covering.

"Hush!" said Esmé; "don't speak, Mr. Auber, it is Angus N'Ort (Angus of the hammer). The music from the barn is enraging him: he's not safe now."

"How, in God's name, comes he here? What is he?" Auber exclaimed.

"He's one of our fools," Esmé said, as she glanced nervously around for some way of getting past unobserved.

Auber led her up the bank, and they passed close to him behind the trees, his eyes flashing restlessly in search of them. Suddenly he caught sight of Esmé's white dress, and, with a yell like a Gaelic battle cry, the madman darted from his tree and again stood in front of them. He threw his arms up vehemently in the air, and, foaming with rage, yelled out,

"Approach not!—advance not! Hear ye the sound o' the timbrel an' dance? I'll cleave ye—I'll brain ye! I am here on the path o' the Lord to save ye from the perdition o' hell. Hear ye no hell in yonder? See ye no the flames from the door? Hear ye no the devilry of crackling mirth and the dancing of the damned within? See ye not Beelzebub blowing the pipes, and hear ye no the yowls o' the lost? Gae back, gae back! or I'll rend your souls out 'ere they gae dancing in there!"

He made a rush up the bank, brandishing the hammer aloft. Auber had scarce time to exclaim in horror, when Esmé, disengaging herself from his protecting grasp, stood forward to meet the madman. Holding up her hands, she rapidly made the sign of the cross before him; as he advanced, she retreated.

down the bank, still facing him and holding her hands up in the form of the cross; the madman following, subdued.

"Go home, Angus! Go home to your aunty Bab," Esmé kept saying; "she can't say her prayers until you go home."

When she got near enough to the door, the burst of sound from within seemed again to rouse the fury of the madman; but turning away from her uplifted hands, he rushed howling towards the wood, disappearing from sight; but the strokes of his hammer smiting the trees, along with his yells, reverberated until he was far in the distance.

"If I had not held up my arms in the form of the cross, he would have attacked us," Esmé said, as Auber the next moment joined her. "He is religiously mad: the most dangerous kind amongst our Highland madnesses, and that was the only way to calm him."

"How, in Heaven's name, is he allowed to go loose?" Auber exclaimed.

Esmé smiled. "There are no lunatic asylums within a hundred and sixty miles of this. Every district of the Highlands has its average number of wandering 'fools': in general they are very harmless, and we like them. The Highlanders are very superstitious, too, on this point, and would not be guilty of harshness or unkindness to one of them on any account: no one ever turns a fool from the door, or refuses him charity. There is daft Jock, who almost lives in Glenbenrough kitchen, and is a clean, harmless creature; you'll see our servants dancing with him to-night. And there was 'Foolish Jeanie,' whom we liked to walk with as children: she was quite an improvisatore in Gaelic, and a vision seer. This Angus N'Ort, however, comes of a mad family, and we are afraid of him: papa could tell you a most horrible story of him going to the lonely church-yard on the hill, where his mother had lately been buried, digging up her coffin with his nails, and being found, the country people said, about to make the feast of the ghoul. He was brought up as a blacksmith (whence his name), but went mad on religion twenty years ago, and he takes dangerous fits if excited by any merry-making. He lives in a hovel beyond the Roua Pass, with an old aunt who is crazy on some points too, and has never been known to speak since death of Angus's mother. She sits, from morning to night, at her cottage door, knitting stockings; and—is it not curious?—she is always knitting at the heel: no one ever saw her begin or end knitting, and yet she has piles of them made

and stored away. Her only luxury is snuffing, which she delights in."

"I consider this state of things more original than pleasant," Auber replied, as they again entered the barn.

A country dance was forming, and had already reached half way down the room; but as not a third of the country people present could reach that complexity of figure, it was more select than the universal reels had been. Glenbenrough and Lady Mac Neil were to lead it off; Norah and Harold stood next; Marion, Julia, and Ishbel, allotted to the schoolmaster, factor, and grieve, stood near. The whole family party, with the exception of Colonel and Mrs. Sternbotham, were to be engaged, and the fiddlers moved uneasily in their seats, evidently impatient to use their bows. Marchmoram was standing at the door as Esmé and Auber entered, and instantly claimed her. Auber sat down, as Esmé and Marchmoram took their places, and Florh Mackenzie and the Glenbenrough game-keeper came and stood next them. The fiddles gave a flourish, and with cross hands and down the middle, away flew the Laird and Lady Mac Neil. Couples followed in quick succession: Ishbel went down at full speed, the grieve, a short stout man, puffing and panting in his efforts to keep up with her. Norah and Harold flew along also, laughing as they danced; the fiddles played fast and furiously, and it was necessary to keep up a rapid pace to avoid collision as the couples increased in number. Down they came in close pursuit, old and young, stout and thin, active and awkward; and then, when the leaders turned, on reaching the wall at the end, the sudden stoppage of the living stream made them surge in a heaving mass for a moment or two, till the retrograde impulse came, and back they went in an overwhelming torrent to the top again. There was an occasional little shriek when a hob-nailed shoe struck a satin slipper, but every one was laughing and dancing with all their might. Marchmoram shielded Esmé with a strong arm and bore her along in safety throughout, till they had reached the end and there was a respite; when he crossed over to her side.

There were three men standing together not far off, one of whom had frequently attracted Esmé's attention, principally by his appearance, but also by a feeling that his gaze was often stedfastly fixed upon herself. He was a short, slight man, *with a lithe, agile figure, dressed in black, which made his olive complexion look still darker.* The expression of his face varied

much, but an unpleasant sinister character predominated : it indicated thought, suavity and deep cunning. The eyes were dark and restless, and the lip had a sarcastic smile almost like a sneer. There was nothing vulgar in the face—it showed knowledge of life, and a sense of power. Altogether it was very superior to what was requisite for a good valet. Ishbel observed this man, too, as she rested for a moment by Esmé.

"Those are your three English valets, are they not, Mr. Marchmoram?" she said: "which of them is yours?"

"You must guess that, Miss Ishbel," he replied.

"Well; there is the staid, gray-haired man, and that grand, tall, stiff man, and this one whose name I wish to know, as well as his master's: he is not like a servant."

"I think that must be Mr. Auber's servant," Esmé said; "the dark-eyed, restless-looking man whom Ishbel notices."

"Why Auber's?" Marchmoram asked.

"Because there is more in his face than in the others. There is some romance in that man," Esmé replied, innocently, yet gravely.

Marchmoram smiled, but bit his lip a little discomposedly, and answered rather sharply,

"Well, Miss Esmé, that hero is Gupini, Harold's *ci-devant* Italian courier; and Harold is not romantic! Auber possesses the stiff, tall, pompous man, who ministers most assiduously to his bodily comforts, and whom Auber consequently fully appreciates. The elderly man is my respectable old Greaves."

"Look, Gupini is going to dance with bonny Jeanie Cameron," Ishbel exclaimed, as the Italian, turning from his compeers, advanced to where a rosy-cheeked Highland girl sat on a bench beside a wrinkled old shepherd: "he chooses the *belle* of the ball."

"Yes, that is a pretty girl, certainly," said Marchmoram; "and I think her face is not altogether unfamiliar to me."

"No; you must have seen her near Dreumah. Her father is a shepherd there; and her grandfather is the celebrated old poacher, Ian Mohr."

"Ah," replied Marchmoram; "I take interest in her, then!—certainly a pretty girl."

"Aneil! mallachad agad!" ("No, curses on you!") muttered a voice in Gaelic, so close to them, and so deep, that the girls both started.

"What a horrid, jealous disposition Ewen has," Ishbel whispered to Esmé, as she turned and frowned at Ewen

Mackenzie, who was scowling vindictively at Marchmoram. "That girl is betrothed to Ewen Mackenzie, Esmé's foster-mother's son," she added aloud to Marchmoram.

"Don't you admire our old nurse, Florh Mackenzie?" asked Esmé, as Florh moved off to dance in the centre. "You know she lives at Lochandhu, where the water-lilies grow."

"Yes, she is a fine specimen of a robust Highland woman. You seem attached to her; you gave her a warm embrace that day when first I saw you."

Esmé slightly reddened. "I did not see you when I rode away. A foster-mother reckons as a close connection here: one of our cousins is a foster-son of her's, and I believe she loves both him and me quite equally with her own children. Florh has a great deal of character, and is very shrewd and sensible: I respect her knowledge in many things."

At this moment the music ceased, and the country dance broke up. Marchmoram gave Esmé his arm, and said,

"Ere we leave, pray give me the history of that patriarchal-looking old man who proposed your papa's health."

"That is old Macrae of Dual Ghu. Many a happy day we have spent there: it is a very wild part of papa's property; a sort of valley or corry of natural grass, which winds and spreads amongst the hills of Dual Ghu. There is not a tree there, and not much heather; only huge rocky ranges, and these plats of natural grass growing there for ages. In the olden times, when the Highland families lived so primitively, and principally by their cattle, there were always these places of natural grass amongst the hills; where, in summer, the cattle were driven for change of pasture. All the ladies of the family moved regularly with them, living in shealings erected for the purpose, and superintended all the dairy labour; even now, the cattle on Highland properties are always driven, at a certain season, to these hill-grazings; and the dairy-maids go with them and live in shealings on the same sites where our grandmothers did. But papa had pasture nearer home, and old Macrae has had the Dual Ghu for more than fifty years: he has large herds of his own there, and lives quite like an old patriarch. Generally, once in every season, papa goes there to shoot the grouse on the hills, and he has often taken us, for you can't fancy how different the air is: it is a complete change from even the pure air here."

"*I can imagine that; absence of wood makes a great difference even in a local climate,*" Marchmoram said, as he joined

with Esmé in the procession which Glenbenrough was marshalling. As they all moved in a body to the door, the people stood up with one accord and cheered with might and main. There was a rush amongst the men, and the barn was nearly emptied as they clustered round the carriages in waiting; and when all who chose were seated, away they went drawing the vehicle with the speed of horses, and shouting until they reached the hall door. They then all returned back again at the same pace, and dancing went on with unabated vigour until near the early breakfast hour next morn.

The hay-loft at the square had been converted into a supper-room, and the distant cheering, as the people sat there drinking Highland toasts in whisky, reached the ears of the party at supper in the mansion house. Colonel Sternbotham had observed to Glenbenrough, ere they left the barn, the general appearance of sobriety; and that, though the bearers with the kettles of hot toddy made, latterly, frequent circuits, there were no evident ill effects. Glenbenrough assented to this truth; but next day, alas! the colonel made a fatal discovery: as he walked through the square with Sir Alastair Mac Neil towards noon next day, the grieve was in the act of opening the door of a small inner barn, the flooring of which was covered with loose straw, and on the straw sat and stood various men looking very sheepish, and in various stages of recovery.

"What's the matter? did an accident happen last night?" Colonel Sternbotham asked, in consternation, at the door.

The grieve and the patients grinned together, as the former replied,

"Hout ava! It's but the fule chieils that got fou! The laird ordered me get these quarters ready afore the gentry wad be scandalized, and aye as a lad got fou last night, we pat him in here oot o' sight and harm's way. The laird's aye mindful!"

"Well done, grieve," said Sir Alastair; "a first-rate arrangement. I must see it carried out at Strathshielie next month."

Colonel Sternbotham said nothing. What a demoralized state of society was this! What would they say in England, if they knew he had been present at a scene where such an incident as this could have occurred? Barbaric intemperance screened, and actually provided for!

A hot supper was spread in the dining-room at Glenbenrough; a haunch of venison and quantities of game smoked on

the table, and champagne was also in abundance. Every one was in high spirits, and some were a little excited: there was a sort of scramble for places. Marchmoram and Esmé entered last; no seats seemed unoccupied until Auber's eye perceived a vacant space near himself and Norah. He called out quickly, "Godfrey, here! come here!" and Marchmoram instantly accepted the offered seats for himself and Esmé. As Auber called out Marchmoram's Christian name Esmé started and turned pale; but no one had noticed it.

The Dreumah party saw a toast drunk with Highland honours for the first time, towards the close of supper. When Glenbenrough proposed the health of Lady Mac Neil, he stood upon his chair, and placed the left foot upon the edge of the table, holding the brimming glass above his head; all the men of the party then did the same, and even Colonel Sternbotham found himself forced to mount upon his chair. Three times three cheers were given, and "Neish, neish, neish!" shouted by the Gaelic voices present; the glasses were then waved and emptied. It was nearly three in the morning when the supper party adjourned to the drawing-room, and the ladies prepared to retire.

The gentlemen of Dreumah were all struck with the fresh, undiminished bloom of the three sisters. Despite the heated exercise of the barn, and the long noisy hours passed, Norah, Esmé, and Ishbel looked, with their healthy blush and wide bright eyes, as if they might have just returned from a morning bathe in their river. The Miss Mac Neils, of Strathshiellie, looked paler; but they had been at an English school for the last few years. Glenbenrough and Sir Alastair saw the Dreumah party start, in a large shooting dog-cart, and wrapped in plaids, on their homeward way: they were, of course, to go by the road and the bridge. Macpherson of Phee and Miss Christy also started at the same time in an opposite direction, for Phee. But the young men of the party again adjourned to the barn, where they danced for an hour or two later; and, I am afraid, also joined heartily in the closing dance of Pease Straw.

Dancing is a universally favourite exercise in the Highlands, and ranks almost as a characteristic of the people. There is no merry-making there, such as a betrothal, marriage, christening, or welcome-home, unaccompanied by the music of the bagpipe; and this old instrument of northern power, the strains of which worked up the blood of the fierce old Highlanders in battle, sending them in maddened enthusiasm onwards, still

rouses the volatile spirit of the modern Celt, the energy of whose kindled fire finds safer vent in enthusiastic strathspey and reel. I have seen old men of eighty—and joined them too—dancing in deep snow, to the pipes, with hail and snow falling unheeded. 'Tis the bagpipe alone, I believe, that gives this impetus to dancing; for in the Lowlands of Scotland (where our dear music reaches not), the people are mostly of the more staid and stolid type of Scotland.

There are some leading traits of strict Presbyterian Scotland which impress generally the national character of her people, and exist equally in the individuality of north and south; regard to parental authority is one of them, and this, transmitted from father to son, carries down the strict moral code which is allowed to be a national characteristic, and whose fruits are seen in decent fathers, proud of their large well-ordered families, and emulative of their equality with neighbours' children. It produces also the educational system which is the boast and honour of Scotchmen. There is scarcely a cottage in Scotland where "the schooling" is not the earliest object of desire inculcated in its children; and, if the father dies, the poor widow starves herself for the education of her bairns. From the lowly hearth, with its homely strict motherly injunctions, and from the humble seat of learning in the parish school, go forth the stalwart sons of Scotia to India, America, and Australia; thence to return with the rich rewards of frugality, temperance, and persevering energy, oft denied to the more brilliant genius of other countries. The national gift of shrewdness enables a Highland drover, almost ignorant of the English tongue, to drive his bargain with pawkiness and canniness, with the long-headed Glasgow salesmaster; and it is this spirit of canniness (unduly developed, I am sorry to say, of late years by English lavishness and extravagance) which has caused the seeds of avarice and greediness to germinate.

The huts of the Highlanders must strike the eye of the English (and would strike the eye of their Lowland brethren, did they as frequently see them,) as squalid indeed. Generally built of rough hill stones, unclayed, with a low peat-thatched roof, dense and dark with smoke, these hovels are jointly inhabited by man and beast: many and many a family live happily in their hovel on an isolated mountain height, or by a *deep winding river*; their only wealth a heathery patch of oats or potatoes, redeemed by the hand from the moorland tract

around them, and perhaps a few goats to give them milk and butter. They live there strong, healthy, and happy; ignorant of any better sort of dwelling, and utterly undesirous of it. I have seen wild-eyed children on the hills, who screamed when shown a looking-glass: and a tall, strong woman who had never seen a staircase in her life, and, from very astonishment at the first sight of one, could not ascend it. The Highland huts (I speak not of the modern model cottages sprinkled here and there on portions of the vast estates lately passed into southern hands) are all built more or less alike, rudely; only that the shepherds' bothies may boast a longer range of unclayed stone; within are bundles of wool for winter spinning, hanging from blackened rafters, with mutton hams and goat's-milk cheeses, and a full meal girdle, and other more affluent appliances. The appearance of the people, as a picture, also assimilates closely. You generally find the old smoke-dried grandmother crooning over the wooden cradle, with its sunburnt baby sleeping on straw (the beds of the cattle are of dried fern), while the sonsy high-capped mother spins the woollen yarn and watches the lassies tramping the blankets with naked feet in the burn; or calls to her husband, a great hulking, taciturn, rough-coated man, sitting on the hearth-stone in the centre of the room, to put a bit more peat to boil up the potatoes.

The Highlanders are mostly slow and taciturn, unless excited to garrulousness by whisky, or by supposed grievance; and these poorer crofters are indolent and slothful in their small business of life. But the shepherds on the Highland hills are, as a class, almost invariably keen, intelligent, and observant; even well read, so as to be masters of their business, and well proved, ere entrusted with so valuable a charge, requiring energy, knowledge, and decision; they are thoroughly trusted by the master, whose profits almost wholly depend on their fidelity and honesty. The strong devotional feeling, so deeply and firmly rooted amongst the people, lives in the minds of the shepherds, and, during their wild night watches, is at once their comfort and their staff of strength. Few better show the power of religion, in the simplicity and the strength of faith, than these men; for with it they combat the supernatural fears that so abound in the Highlands, and which, if obeyed (as by minds *less stayed*, and as much prejudiced, they would be), must *cause failure* in duty and loss of property to their master. *No men are more superstitious than the shepherds, and no men*

more manfully brave it. It may be from the increasing growth and hold of religion, within the last fifty years, in the Highlands, that superstition has proportionably decreased; for, though there is still much extant, there is not nearly so much as in the olden times; nor more, perhaps, than accord with the character of their life, and the scenery of the country. The lonely brown-coloured tarns, where the shepherd's dog descends from the hill to drink, fighting away the bittern that breaks the solitude with her shriek as she flies, may well suggest the black-haired Kelpie, diving from sight, and scarcely distinguishable on a dark night from the water. The rowan tree, laden with its scarlet berries, growing groundless amongst the rocks, and the fragrant bog-myrtle scenting the air, have always had power against witch, hag, and bodach, watchful for soul and body of wandering maiden; while the accursed gambols of brown-eyed hares on a moonlight night show their distortion of limb; and a gun, fired bravely amongst them, has sent a track of blood direct back to the kirkyard, whence they came. Many a strong-nerved man, or prayerful woman, wending quick in the twilight for distant aid for the dying, has sworn to the death-light, flickering, lurid, faint, and blue, on the path before them: it almost invariably burns on the mossy swamp round the hut, where night-watchers sit wakeful by the dying.

Then there is the fatal Fetch, that fearful second self, following noiselessly—the soul momentarily disembodied as a warning, following the living body, and retaining its image, with mocking steps to the grave. The Fetch is not that reflection on the mist which generally the shepherd alone perceives at early sunrise: it comes at unsettled hour and place, is never visible to the doomed one, but follows male or female on the hearth, and on the hill. It is horribly palpable, and its dread familiarity is not for a moment to be classed or confounded with those other flitting misty wraiths of out-door life, of which we shall speak anon. The Fetch of the strong-built, buxom, hearty mother of the family has been known to enter a hut, heralding in mockery the real approach of the living flesh and blood, and, approaching the kitchen fire, has poked it, and busily proceeded to the domestic duties, totally unsuspected by the on-lookers—silence being the only earthly trace of suspicion—until the appearance of the real person, entering with high voice and step, and acting over again the scene just rehearsed (*being blinded to the Fetch just disappearing on her entrance*) *has betrayed to the startled gazers the fearful fact of its recent*

presence. The Fetch has also come gliding in amongst the fireside evening circle, in the pale and fragile form of the farmer's love-lorn daughter, then, in reality, lying in slumber, sighing on her dreaming pillow; as the sisters find when they go to her room. In most cases the death warrant surely follows; but there are times when the Fetch's prophecy seems averted, though sickening anxiety is felt long after its visitation: one human means of aid towards this merciful result often lies in carefully withholding from the threatened one the past fearful vision of warning.

There are other sights and sounds without, which belong almost exclusively to the open-air life of the shepherds, or others who may, like them, take their lonely station night and morning in deep, solitary, echoing ravines, or by the roaring cataracts of unseen waterfall and lynn; and that there are sights and sounds which exclusively and alone are to be seen and heard in mountainous regions, neither experience nor science can deny. More than one English sportsman could testify to his own shadowed semblance keeping pace, approaching, or retreating, in misty vividness on an early morning, when out on the hill top intent only on the motions of the deer; as well as to the creeping sensations of awe, overcoming, on first encounter with the wraith-like self, all scientific knowledge of its simple origin in nature's law. But I do not know if any Englishman has seen those vaster visions of spiritual mockery of life, to which many a native inhabitant of Strath and Highland Glen will give creditable oath—I mean those moving vistas of bloody battle, funeral pageant, or turbulent scene of ancient foray, which have been viewed in shadowy distinctness by breathless gazers far removed from sympathy with such scenes. There have been seen wild flying phalanxes of kilted men speeding before a conquering clan, and every incident of bloody battle and retreat, extending vividly and distinctly over the breadth of a sunlit hill, and lasting visibly for an hour—the hard-pressed fugitive going headlong in his haste o'er a death-steep precipice, the fallen stabbed cruelly by pursuing foe, the desperate stand of despairing strength, the impetuous rally, and last repulse. At one time have been seen with the naked eye furious herds of o'erdriven cattle trampling over the distant swamp, urged on with hasty gesture and soundless speed *by successful drovers, who perhaps had thus driven them, rived from the Lowlands, a hundred years before; and again, from beneath the wreaths of smoke rising slow and dark from a dis-*

tant hill, has wound the mighty funeral of some departed chief, who thus, on a day of ancient date long since forgotten, was borne with lighted torches and inflated pipes by hundreds of retainers to the far-off family burial-place. These sights have been seen on sunny morns as well as on misty nights; and the country people will tell you, that below that battle-ground lie deep the bones of many who died there in clannish fight. As for those other shadows, it was over yon hill-side that Macdonald of Stran Shanshie drove the largest foray ever brought home, and the funerals of the chiefs of Grant Aye went for ages back at night by that lone haunted way.



CHAPTER VII.

NORMAL MAC ALASTAIR.

Bonny Kilmeny gaed up the glen,
But it was na to meet Duneira's men.
It was only to hear the yarlin sing,
And pu' the cress-flower round the spring;
The scarlet hypp, and the hyndberrye,
And the nut that hangs frae the hazel tree,
For Kilmeny was pure as pure could be.—Hogg.

THE breakfast party next morning at Glenbenrough was much diminished in number. Mrs. Sternbotham was confined to her room with headache, and neither Roderick nor Patrick Mac Neil appeared. The family of Strathshielie were to leave the next day, but Glenbenrough insisted on the young people being left behind, to pay a longer visit to their cousins. Marion and Julia looked delighted, for sundry schemes of out-door amusement had been planned by the five girls, even ere seeking their beds that morning. The day passed in quiet occupation: Norah, Ishbel, and Julia gathered flowers, and the former arranged them. After lunch Mrs. Sternbotham appeared; Norah paid her exclusive attention, and strolled with her and Lady Mac Neil to the foot of the Roua Pass, where they were joined by the others. With much assistance, and assurances of recompence in the view, they got Mrs. Sternbotham to the top, and on to the Pass; but when she found herself on the perilous edge, and, instead of gazing on the glorious spreading distant landscape, caught sight of the red precipice slanting headlong to the dark waters beneath, she screamed and shut her eyes; and Norah held her with a nervous grasp as she let

her, blindfold and tottering, back the few steps, to the safety of the broad bosom of the hill. Mrs. Sternbotham got down quicker than she had ascended, and had seen only horror and no beauty in the glimpse she had allowed herself to take.

Next day, the first of September, was bright and warm, favourable for the long drive back to Strathshielie; as Sir Alastair and Lady Mac Neil were to take their departure home, accompanied by the Sternbothams, but leaving their two sons and daughters to pay a longer and indefinite visit at Glenbenrough. It was with a great feeling of relief that the young people saw the colonel mount to the front seat beside Sir Alastair, and drive away as he had come; the bright jovial face of the good-tempered Highland baronet atoning for the sour parting smile of his guest.

Ishbel gave three skips from the ground. "Now do let us get up our spirits! Roderick and Patrick, will you come and have a romp round the haystacks after lunch? Yes; very well—all settled. Papa, you must come and be our 'parley.'"

"That I will," replied Glenbenrough; "so you don't ask me to run."

Accordingly, after dinner, the band of seven, with Glenbenrough at their head, all started to a field above the square, where a good range of haystacks stood. Marion and Julia had exchanged their bonnets for their wideawakes, which had been in reserve until Colonel Sternbotham should depart; and they were all in high spirits like a band of children. A rose bush was declared the "parley" or safety point, and there Glenbenrough sat, clapping his hands, and shouting warning, or fair play, while they played hide and seek among the hay stacks. Roderick Mac Neil was the enemy, in pursuit of all the others, who kept in ambush each behind a haystack, while he ranged round and round in search and pursuit, pouncing on a new victim when one gave him the slip, and sometimes having three together flying with shrieks before him. When very hard pressed they broke cover and rushed to parley, where they were safe; and when one was caught, he or she was delivered over to parley, who was to be kept in prison until all had been captured. At last this was accomplished, and Roderick lay down on the grass breathless.

"Now we shall have Fox and Goose," cried Ishbel. "Patrick, you must be Fox. Who'll be Mother Goose or Father Gander?"

"Papa, papa, look who is coming!" exclaimed Norah, as a tall young man in the Highland dress appeared at the gate of the field; "it is Normal Arduashien."

Glenbenrough rose up hastily. "Welcome, my boy," he said, as young Normal Mac Alastair came up, and clapping him on his shoulder with warmest affection,—“here's a goodly meeting of the young generation. Welcome, my boy, amongst us!"

Normal reddened as he smiled and shook hands all around; there were five pretty cousins all evidently glad to see him. He was a tall, powerfully-built young man of, it might be, one or two and twenty; his complexion was sunburnt, he had fair glossy hair in thick natural curl, and eyes of a hazel gray; his mouth was good, but a little sullen in expression.

"And when did you arrive at Arduashien, my boy? and how is your father?" Glenbenrough asked as he again sat down. "Are your traps at the house? I did not even hear you were in the country yet."

"I only arrived at home two days ago. I told the governor I was forgetting how to shoot, and he allowed me to leave Edinburgh by return of mail. I intend to find the road blocked up with snow when he wants me to return. Even Mackenzie told me of the party here, so I thought I would join you for a few days."

"Well, we must go in until you get something to eat; we can finish this game afterwards," said Glenbenrough.

"No, not for me!" exclaimed Normal; "we came by Lochandhu, and Florh Mackenzie would not allow me to pass until I made a hearty feast on mutton-ham and eggs, oat-cake, and all sorts of good things. She told me of your being there, yesterday," he added, turning to Esmé. "I wish I had been at the barn dance; but I know I was not missed: I have heard of it all."

"Well now, off with your plaid, Normal!" cried Ishbel, "and be father gander to the little goslings; we are going to play Fox and Goose."

Normal was ready; and ten minutes after his arrival, and after his rugged ride of thirty miles, he was in the midst of the really violent exercise, springing, running, and wrestling with Patrick Mac Neil, in defence of his long train of terrified goslings. It was more exciting than the hay stack romp: each held on to his neighbour by part of the dress, in a long string; the nearest to Normal clasping him tightly by the back

of his jacket. The fox, in the shape of Patrick, came, making frightful grimaces and noises in front of the gander, and asked him for a gosling; which, on being indignantly refused, with great flapping in the face of the fox, the latter made a spring, and tried to carry one off. The battle then got warm and active; the fox flying to the rear, and the gander wheeling round, dragging his family clinging to each other after him. When the fox at last succeeded in seizing a fluttering gosling, he rushed with it to a place of safety, and then came back to the attack, until he had succeeded in robbing the gander (if he could) of every one of the flock. Shouts of laughter, alternated with shrieks of terror, as the contest proceeded, mingled with exclamations of, "Dear child, don't tear my dress!" "Oh, do hold hard; Normal, Normal, save us!" When the game was over, there were flushed cheeks and eyes sparkling with the exercise, but no signs of fatigue. Glenbenrough proposed a change of scene and an adjournment to the river; but a counter proposition of one game at "Engleish laufen" was carried by acclamation. This was a German romp, taught in childish years by Mademoiselle Backhacker, the governess at Glenbenrough. Patrick Mac Neil and Norah, Esmé and Roderick, Marion and Glenbenrough (who was obliged to join), Julia and Ishbel, all stood in a row of couples; Normal being posted at a short distance in front. "Once," "twice," "thrice," was shouted, and the last couple, parting asunder, ran with all their speed, and endeavoured to join hands together, meeting again in the front of the first couple. This Normal endeavoured to prevent, by catching one of the fugitives ere she could meet her fellow hand; if he succeeded he took her place, and she stood ready to intercept the last couple in like manner; and until she thus caught one to exchange pursuer for pursued, she had to act in first capacity. There was no end to this "English running" until the girls were fairly exhausted; when with one accord the whole band threw themselves on the grass, breathless as hunted hares. Glenbenrough was the first to rise and pronounce himself recovered, and then they all walked back to the house, laughing over injured dresses and heightened complexions.

It was a pleasant sight at the merry dinner-table that day to see the mellow autumnal face of Glenbenrough, his kindly blue eye resting with such proud content on his three loved daughters midst the group of youthful faces round; and to see *even still, in his upright time-worn figure, the marks of a manly*

bearing, superior in its day to that of the stalwart young men then present, his ready laugh ringing with theirs, and they paying honour to each sentiment that fell from those ever truthful lips. He lived anew in them, in their youthful brightness, and they wished to live as he had done. The piper was sent for after tea, and reels were danced for half an hour; then Norah went to the piano and played some valzes and polkas. Roderick and Patrick danced admirably, but Normal sat down: he did not valse or polk, and he looked a little sullen while these dances lasted. Esmé said she was tired at last, and sat down near him on the window-seat; but he did not speak. As Norah and the other girls rose to say good night, on Cameron appearing with the tray and glasses, she said,

"Oh, papa, if to-morrow is a fine day we should much like to go and lunch at the little falls of Aultva. Sandy could have the coble ready; it, with our boat, would take us nicely down the river, and then we could carry the baskets on landing."

"A very good plan. Well, I shall be ready by twelve o'clock, after I have had a little talk with the grieve."

"Those who prefer shooting can please themselves," Esmé said, as she looked back, and her eye met Normal's. She gave a momentary smile, and he smiled away his frown.

Normal Mac Alastair was an only son, and heir to the property of Arduashien, which was far greater in extent than that of Glenbenrough. He had been educated almost wholly at home, and with a constant view to this succession; and it was curious how the formation of his character went on under this home influence, in counteraction to a strong natural one. He was passionately fond of the Highlands, and hereditary pride flowed through his viens, strengthening the force of early association; but he also had too much natural character to feel satisfied with a view of his life and death as a Highland laird. Normal had a restless inward desire for a wider field, and for opportunity of exerting his energies in obtaining distinction in life; but he never could analyse this feeling, or determine how it should be worked out. His mental culture had been cramped by home education and constant parental guardianship, and he felt he could only give vent to his strong animal life and energy of purpose in physical exertion and excitement. He was strong in arm, swift of foot, and patient of hardship; and those powers that, had opportunity offered, might have *earned him fame and glory as a soldier, he spent in strategy.*

in sport, and unflinching hours of self-denial and fatigue. When tired of sport, or bound to physical quiet on a winter night, he sat and read in some of the sterling authors of antiquity, or brooded musingly before the glowing embers of his bedroom fire; cravings for a wider sphere of action then recurred strongly to his mind, and he would rise and pace the room with burning eyes, like an eagle imprisoned from its birth, with an instinctive desire of liberty but no true experience of it; and then came subtly flitting images of Esmé Mac Neil, ministering intellectual sympathy. From his childhood she had always exerted power and influence over him; there was that in Esmé which roused and made him feel his powers, and also that which soothed and steadied him, too. His secret aspirations were entwined with ideas of her: she was his in heart and soul; but it was with secret love, strong and deep, that he carried her ever sacred in his bosom. Dearer and stronger burned his love, for that his pride concealed it. Normal's nature was a very reserved one; it was proud, and, as yet, dissatisfied; and not for his life would he have yet betrayed his feelings to Esmé. His fine truthfulness of character, his noble spirit, his high-bred honour, and even his deep powers of thought were all withdrawn from common outward view; and though Esmé well knew he possessed all these, yet the strength of his pride still kept back the certainty of his love. There is, however, a mesmeric influence which always announces admiration to the admired, though no outward visible proof could possibly have been shown; and Esmé knew that Normal was gazing at her, listening to her, and would be jealous of her, but she did not know that he loved her: he never, by the slightest sign, showed that he did; and though she felt a strong interest in him, yet the chill of his cold temperament repelled thoughts of love in her. She did not like that perfect restraint which Scotchmen have to so wonderful a degree over passion and imagination—that cold constancy which will love a woman all her life, and yet never warm into words to tell her so: Esmé did not believe in it.

Next morning was the second of September, and bright and bracing as sportsmen could wish; but the girls hailed it as suited for luncheoning at the falls of Aultva.

About two miles lower down the river Rouagh a burn came *flowing through a gorge*; and on this burn (wide enough to *have taken the name of river in the Lowlands*) there was a *succession of falls*, called the Aultva, and which few admiring

eyes, save those from Glenbenrough, had ever discovered: the waters flowed and foamed in a scene of utter solitude and beauty. At twelve o'clock sundry game baskets, packed and fastened, lay on the hall steps, and Glenbenrough was shouting to his girls and boys, as he called them, to make haste and start. Norah, Esmé, and Ishbel were soon at the hall door; they wore dresses of purple linsey-wolsey, with jackets of the same material, and dark wideawakes with black velvet ribbons; Marion and Julia Mac Neil wore skirts and jackets of light brown linsey: all five girls wore woollen stockings of purple and brown dye, to suit their dresses; and, as their skirts were short, for stepping through the heather, their various-coloured stockings and fantastically cut brogues never escaped notice.

Normal had run on to the Roua Pass, and was busily pulling up some deers'-grass to decorate their wideawakes, when he looked up and saw the English sportsmen advancing: they were turning the Roua Pass, on their way to the house. Marchmoram and the other two gentlemen carried their guns; they had worked from Dreumah, taking the flat of Bohrdell and Erickava in their way, and shooting any chance partridges that rose from the patches of oat field. Glenbenrough met them at the foot of the Roua Pass, and told Marchmoram he knew it could be no sacrifice to them to lay by their guns for the day; and that they must join the family pic-nic, and assist in rowing the ladies down the river. Consent was quickly given, and the whole party sallied to the garden, followed by the keeper, Sandie, and Cameron, the old man-servant, carrying the baskets. The boat and coble were unmoored; Ewen Mackenzie was in waiting by the latter, and he took one oar, while Normal took the other. Ewen made no gesture of deferential recognition to Marchmoram, who seemed to have forgot the existence of his quondam gillie. While some stepped into the boat, and some into the coble, Norah and Esmé were dividing a bundle of fishing-rods by the boat-house. Ewen stepped out of the coble (which was to be rowed by him and Normal) to receive the rods and hand Esmé in, but she gave her hand to Marchmoram and stepped with him into the boat, and the next moment they pushed off from the bank. They rowed lower down the river than on the evening that Marchmoram had been there before, and the farther they went the more striking and beautiful the scenery became. *The rich luxuriance of tangled ivy, wild holly, and honeysuckle, intermingled with stately lime and chestnuts, periancing*

the breeze on either bank, was succeeded by rocks and ferns, wild gene and laburnum; then came a sweeping fringe of weeping birches, hanging over the water's edge, and softening the peaked gray rocks on every side. The river grew bolder in its beauty as they floated on, and the tributary torrents came rushing in dark currents from unseen sources. Suddenly the coble drew in towards a high black rock, and rounding it was soon out of sight; the boat followed, and they presently reached the landing-place, in a ravine which ran up precipitously from the shore, and down which boiled the burn of Aultva. There was no path along the rocky edge, which they all ascended, in broken file, but the weeping birches shadowed the water all the way, until a thicker group in advance quite obscured the torrent's course.

Here Glenbenrough called a halt, until the basket-bearers from the boat, who were scrambling after, had come up; they then all skirted the trees, and came out in sight of the falls. The ravine ran up in rocky wildness, bounding the near horizon, and from the top, foaming 'twixt the split chasm, came the water breaking in its rocky course, to where they stood, into seven distinct falls. The last fall spread wide as it descended into its hollow basin, where, as if exhausted by their everlasting rapid flow, the waters lay sleeping in silent depth at the roots of the birch-trees. There was a smooth oval plot of heathery grass here, along the brink, and the shadow of the trees fell refreshingly on the naked rocks above. While half the party stood mute amidst the roar of the dashing waters, gazing on the seven falls of Aultva, the other half were busy arranging the bivouac beside them. A table-cloth was spread on the flat grass, loose stones being placed to keep it smooth, and cold grouse and partridge, tongue, poultry, jars of butter, loaves of bread, oat-cakes, marmalade, and pastry were set out in orderly array. Bottles of wine and beer desecrated the brink of the fall; champagne was put to cool in the water; and in a few minutes the blaze of a wood-fire arose at some distance. The air was sharp at this height, and all were hungry. Glenbenrough called out for the first course to be served, and Norah summoned assistance as she hurried to the fire, where some covered pans lay ready containing slices of bacon, quantities of eggs, and cold soup waiting to be cooked. Harold made himself a paper cap, *and presided with a birchen wand, while the girls fried the eggs and heated the soup, and the gentlemen strove for the honour of bearing the dishes to the table-cloth. It was a merry party,*

and free ; there was no restraint of conventional formality, and no cold stare of surprise at the merry laugh or exclamations of child-like glee : the men of the world enjoyed the naturalness of all around them, the freshness of the voices and of the sentiments. Plaids and wideawakes lay scattered on the heather, and the sun smote lovingly the cheeks of the smiling girls, gilding as with classic glory the golden hair of Esmé. Marchmoram felt a sort of fascination in the rare beauty of her hair.

When lunch was over, the circle broke up. Glenbenrough asked who intended to use the fishing-rods ; Norah, Julia, Harold, and the sons of Strathshielie declared themselves in readiness : there were some good trout pools in the river beneath, and they all began the descent. Esmé turned to Marchmoram, and asked him if he would go up to the highest fall, from whence there was a beautiful view beyond. Auber, Normal, Ishbel, and Marion Mac Neil also joined, and they scrambled upwards ; the spray making the rocks slippery. Normal took the lead, stepping with the ease and grace of native security : he wore the kilt, which well became his athletic figure.

"Have you never tried the Highland dress, Mr. Marchmoram ?" Ishbel asked, as she followed next. "It surely must be the most suited for exercise."

Marchmoram laughed and replied,

"No, Miss Ishbel, I am one of those who think the manner of the dress can never be acquired ; and I object to being laughed at by Highland young ladies."

"Well, I do think I could discover an Englishman in the kilt at once. We had a large pic-nic at Strathshielie last year, and I at once found out four Englishmen in the Highland dress ; when they prepared to sit down to lunch on the grass, instead of dropping on one knee, and then seating themselves as a Highlander would, they all scrambled and wriggled from their feet to the ground, holding down their kilts with the most wonderful contortions."

Marion gave poor little Ishbel a look which abruptly stopped her ; but Auber and Marchmoram betrayed not their thoughts that her description was rather an awkward one.

The view from the upper fall was indeed striking ; the eye followed the windings of the Rouagh, amid a beautiful diversity of wood, hills, and water along its banks, while behind them rose tier upon tier of barren rock and mountain, extending back in endless range. The Aultva came flowing in a broad, clear brown stream to the verge, where suddenly, through the rocky

cleft, it poured down with a rush into the falls of the gorge, and on to the river beneath. They all stood on the edge of the chasm, their voices scarcely heard above the water's roar. Esmé turned to Normal.

"Is not this grand? I should like to see a deer spring over now: something to give momentary impetus."

She had scarce uttered the words when she gave a piercing scream, as Normal himself bounded forward; like a deer he sprang, and alighted with a rebound on the opposite side. It was a leap that the breadth of a pebble might have made fatal. Ere a word could be uttered, he leaped back again. Esmé shut her eyes and shuddered, though she knew he was safe at her side.

"Normal! dear Normal! what induced you?" she exclaimed at last, in reproach.

"I knew I could do it; and you wished to see it spanned by living exertion. It was very little to me, Esmé," and Normal smiled.

Auber slightly glanced at Marchmoram. Here was the enthusiasm of a mountaineer: it was a gallant exploit, though prompted by pride. Normal was in high spirits as they descended the ravine: he had thrown off all habitual reserve, or shyness, amidst the unrestraint of the merry lunch; and on the river, when boating home, and all the evening afterwards, his sallies and dry humour elicited frequent laughter. His shrewd observation and sense of the ludicrous, as yet confined to a local circle, found vent in characteristic imitations of national peculiarity: and he imitated with sarcastic truth Scotch character, whether in Gaelic gesticulation or cautious Lowland sentiment. Normal was not satisfied with displaying physical superiority: the pride which pervaded his nature was the latent power which would have carried him on to higher things. As a soldier, with opportunity, that mind and body would have achieved distinction; but the path was then closed. It was pride and discontent which made him sullen and reserved: the former, from knowing that he ought not to be eclipsed; the latter, from feeling that he knew not how to prevent it. He required the teaching of experience of wider life. Ishbel delighted in her cousin Normal: she admired his Highland manliness; and regarding him as hereditary lord of the soil and *people*, she felt a deference for his birthright, and himself. *Ishbel danced and played like a sunbeam about him: if he frowned, she would flit out of his sight and be ready to*

cross his path again whenever she thought a smile was returning.

The whole party were assembled at the rocks beneath, for starting, and the fishing party had caught some dozen of river trout; but, unfortunately, both ladies had met with an accident: Julia Mac Neil, in stepping from one stone to another, had lost her balance and fell into the water, dragging Norah with her; and Harold, who was nearest, in his energetic haste to help, broke Norah's rod in two. The girls only laughed at their ducking; they were not very wet, as their linsey woolsey dresses had somewhat of a waterproof quality. One of the gillies was rubbing Norah's dress with dry heather, and consoling her.

"Och, you're no drowned! Are ye no?"

"I don't think she is, Sandie," Normal said, as the kind inquirer turned to pack the boat. "Sandie is a character," he added,—“his judgment wants reliance. Last autumn he was out with me at the Dual Ghu, and we came upon one of those dark brown tarns sunk amongst low heathery hills.

“‘What's the name of this gloomy loch, Sandie?’

“‘They ca' it Loch na Bashte.’

“‘And what does that mean?’

“‘Deed it's the Loch o' the Baste. They're sayin' in the days o' Ossian there lived a wild baste in it, and Fingal and his men killed it. It used to ate up all the people and cattle that offered to come the way. But I'm no *quite* sure that it's true.’

“‘Aren't you, Sandie? Well, neither am I!’ He scratched his head, and was quite satisfied: our doubts were equally balanced.”

The gloaming was falling fast, as the party rowed homewards; but it was a still, calm evening. Of course the Dreumah sportsmen must remain to dinner; and a gillie was despatched to bring ponies for a moonlight ride home. The dinner was late, and when the ladies re-entered the drawing-room after it, the moon was shining in at the windows, disputing the light with blazing pine-wood. The gentlemen soon appeared; and the group of five girls all seated in a circle on the Turkey rug, their white dresses brightened by the glow of the fire, formed a pretty tableau.

“I guess what has been going on here, young ladies,” exclaimed Glenbenrough, as the opening door revealed them; “*stories of ghosts and hob-goblins!*”

“Oh yes, papa,” cried Ishbel, as all rose up confusedly:

"not one of us could have lifted a hand to pull the bell for lights; you can't imagine anything so fearful. Marion has been telling us a true story of one of her school-fellows' aunts in England sleeping in a haunted room, and being awakened by a weight on her feet; and there was a bloody head, which danced all over her in the bed until she fainted; it happened at Graythorne Hall, in Derbyshire; and Esmé has improvised half-a-dozen still more dreadful stories. Nurse Florh translates ghost stories from the Gaelic for Esmé, and she knows all about our family ghosts too."

"Well, Miss Esmé, pray try our nerves also," exclaimed Marchmoram. "This is the very witching hour, and we shall enjoy the excitement of fear in riding to Dreumah to-night. Tell us of your Highland kelpies and bogles, and we will raise legitimate Saxon ghosts for you!"

So some on the carpet, and others on seats, the whole party sat down again by the light of the fire; but inspiration had passed, or shyness succeeded, and none of the girls would proceed. Harold was called upon, as Auber and Marchmoram declared that Harold's Hall and Britton Castle were about the most haunted houses in England, and teemed with ancient pictures and legends. He began, and admirably he told, with low measured voice, of the dark-eyed Lady Hildegonde, whose deeds had rendered three of the rooms of Britton Castle uninhabitable to modern tenants. In one, the wailing voice of a child issues at midnight hour from a closed closet in the wall; and, in a second, stifled breathing and gasps for mercy come ever and anon. It was in an arm-chair in this room that, tradition says, the strong hand of the cruel Lady Hildegonde pressed out the life of a fair young girl, whose beauty was her crime; in the last dread room, the spirit fled from the evil Lady Hildegonde; and a demoniac face of triumph, that of her husband, who laughed as she was dying, still peers nightly in at the crimson curtains of the bed.

Harold told these dark legends of the past with such awful effect, that some of the listeners shuddered, and several of the fair faces present paled as he ceased. It was almost a relief, from the difference in style (though the matter was, perhaps, still more horribly suggestive) when Roderick Mac Neil volunteered to tell them an anecdote; which could be vouched for as truth by Patrick also, it having been witnessed by both. He addressed himself to Glenbenrough, and asked him if he remembered the stepmother of a niece of Lady Mac Neil.

"Her name was Mrs. Robson, and she used to visit our old cousin, Mrs. Stuart, at Drakehill, where Patrick and I used so often to spend our holidays. Well, that Mrs. Robson, it was everywhere whispered, was a wicked old woman, unrepentant for an ill-spent life, and mamma's niece could never bear to hear her name mentioned. As children at Drakehill, we used to dread the sight of her old green chariot approaching; and well do I recollect her swarthy face, with small close-set eyes, hooked nose and large teeth, her tall grim figure leaning on a stick, and rustling in silk. She had a habit of muttering to herself, and glancing constantly across her left shoulder. Well, she usually occupied, when at Drakehill, a room at the head of a flight of stairs, and our bedroom was in a passage at the foot. She had gone to her room at her usual evening hour (she never would remain, or be present, at family worship); and after all the family had retired, Patrick and I stole downstairs on a foray, and carried up from the housekeeper's room, as boys will do, materials for a bedroom supper. We were seated in delight over cold pie and porter, when the clock struck one; and, at the same moment, a low howl, as of a dog, came from the passage. Our door flew open, and I think I can see now the huge skulking dog that entered; black as a coal, and with gleaming eyes, his jaws hanging open, and water trickling from his grinning white teeth. We sat as if transfixed, our knives and forks upright in our hands, as he prowled round the room, sniffing the air and whining unnaturally. He gave a long-drawn howl as he left the room, and Patrick and I, snatching up the candle, ran out after him. He went up the stairs towards Mrs. Robson's room, and, throwing back his head with a third long low howl, he entered: the door seemed to give way and open to him, and shut again. The next moment we heard a sort of eldritch shriek in the room. Patrick and I rushed back and rang our bell furiously; the housemaid came half-dressed from her bed, and we hurriedly told her a black dog had gone into Mrs. Robson's room—we were shivering with eerie sensations. She rang the bell again vigorously until another maid was roused and came up stairs, and we then proceeded to Mrs. Robson's room with them, bearing lights. Her room was in darkness, and the curtains of her bed drawn close: no vestige of a black dog was to be seen, but Mrs. Robson lay on her bed stone dead. The house was alarmed, and, in hurry and horror at our tale, all searched, while some crowded together in that dark room, but no dog was found; its appear-

ance never was, or could be, accounted for : all the doors windows, high and low, were still locked and shut, as they been for many hours before."

"Well, these stories may be true," said Esmé, as rema grave and gay, went round. "At least they are told as t and vouched by eyesight ; and who amongst us could p their falsity ? But I have no fear."

"But you should have fear, Esmé," said Normal, smil as he sat on a low stool next her ; "and never brave dark or solitude—

"For this was seen o' King Henrie,
As he lay burd alane,
For he took him to a haunted hunts' ha',
Was seven miles from a toun.

"He chased the dun deer through the wood,
And the roe down by the den,
Till the fattest buck in a' the herd
King Henrie he has slain.

"He's ta'en him to his huntin' ha'
For to make burly cheer,
When loud the wind was heard to sough,
And an earthquake rocked the floor.

"And darkness covered a' the hall,
Where they sat at their meat ;
The gray dogs youling, left their food
And crawled to Henrie's feet.

"And louder howled the rising wind,
And burst the fasten'd door,
And in there came a griesly ghost,
Stood stamping on the floor.

"Her head touched the roof tree of the house,
Her middle ye weel mot span ;
Each frightened huntsman fled the ha'
And left the King alane.

"Her teeth were a' like tether stakes,
Her nose like club or mell,
And I ken naething she appeared to be
But the fiend that wous in hell.

"Sum meat, sum meat, ye King Henrie !
Sum meat ye gie to me !"

"And what meat's in this ha', Ladyc,
That ye'se nae welcum tee ?"

"Oh, ye'se gae kill your berry-brown steed,
And serve him up to me."

" Oh, when he killed his berry-brown steed,
Wow but his heart was sair !
She eat him a' up, skin and bane,
Left naething but hide and hair.

" ' Mair meat, mair meat, ye King Henrie !
Mair meat ye gie to me !'
' And what meat's i' this ha', Ladye,
That ye'se nae welcum tee ?'
' Oh, do ye slay your gude gray houndes,
And bring them a' to me."

" Oh, when he slew his gude gray houndes,
Wow 'gin his heart was sair !
She ate them up, ane by ane,
Left naething but hide and hair.

" ' Mair meat, mair meat, ye King Henrie !
Mair meat ye gie to me !'
' And what meat's in this ha', Ladye,
That I hae left to gie ?'
' Oh, do ye fell your gay goss-hawks
And bring them a' to me."

" Oh, when he felled his gay goss-hawks,
Wow but his heart was sair !
She ate them up, bane and bane,
Left naething but feathers bare.

" ' A bed, a bed, ye King Henrie !
A bed ye mak' to me !'
' And where's the bed i' this ha', Ladye,
That ye're nae welcum tee ?'
' Oh ye maun pu' the greene heather,
And mak' a bed to me."

" Oh, pu'd has he the heather greene,
And made to her a bed ;
And up he has ta'en his royale mantle,
And o'er it he has spread.

" ' Now swear, now swear, ye King Henrie,
To tak' me for your bride !'
' Oh, Gad forbid,' King Henry said,
' That e'er the like betide !'

" However, King Henrie, I believe, changed his mind, for the griesly ghost became transformed into the ' fairest ladye that e'er was seen,' " Normal added.

" Well," said Glenbenrough, as he poked the fire and added huge billets of pine to the blaze ; " I confess to feeling gruesome.

Let us banish the ghosts, and have tea." And Norah and all rising, a busy hum succeeded. Cameron entered with lights and the hissing urn, Esmé sat down to the piano, and, after a sad Highland Coronach as prelude, played lively dancing music, to dissipate any lingering sombre feeling.

After tea the piper was sent for, and the Dreumah party found themselves soon perfect in the reel of Thulighan. Harold danced in earnest, and bid fair to equal the intricate steps of the Mac Neils. Norah told him it was famous, and that the whole secret was enthusiasm and a good ear; as had once been exemplified in a cousin of theirs, who had found himself suddenly the admired of all spectators, at the Inverness Northern Meeting Ball. Prince Albert was present, and the royal eyes followed and applauded his dancing in the great "after supper" reel. Cousin Colin was a tall pale man, and in his excitement danced like one possessed; but when it was over he rushed to the door for air and breath. Several asked him how he had lately acquired such perfection in the Highland fling, when, gasping and laughing, he told them it was the reminiscence of a hornpipe—shuffle and cut—which he had been taught at an English village-school as a boy.

Round games followed the reel dancing; French blind man's buff, where Scotch or English accent were equally undistinguishable in disguised tones, and gentlemen sadly failed in gallantry, refusing to grasp the pointed stick, and almost dragging forward a reluctant, laughing fair to act her part. Then followed the absurd game of the chairs, which the German Governess had taught the young ladies of Glenbenrough; and next the game of the ring, for the purpose of exacting forfeits. In these it fell to Normal to execute that delicate task of paying a compliment to and bantering each person in the room; and admirable he fulfilled it. Marchmoram's dark eye, however, gleamed on the young Celt a little impatiently: he did not brook personality. At last forfeits and all were exhausted, and Glenbenrough, who had to be up by the dawn next morning, began to rub his eyes; he would not for the world have given broader hint: while his guests were happy, he was happy and sleepless.

Norah saw his fatigue, and soon Cameron appeared with the laden tray, and the merry party subsided into that sort of calm which generally prevails ere breaking up: Auber sat down near Esmé on the sofa. She was pale, and her large blue eyes were dilated by the excitement.

"I delight in these games," she said : "I like to feel one's life, whether in thought or action."

Ere Auber could reply, Marchmoram approached and asked abruptly, "Are your cousins to make a long stay?"

"I fear not very long. Friends are expected at Strathshielie by-and-by; and then my cousins must return. However, I am looking forward to our going for a week to the Dual Ghu: papa has promised to take us there. The grouse must be visited; and some of my cousins will come also, and take their guns."

Marchmoram shortly afterwards addressed Glenbenrough, asking him if he had ever visited the south peak of the hill of Corrieandhu? "We lunched within it the other day; and it was partly with the view of begging you to fix a day to come and do so also, that we ventured here in such a strong party to-day. I would propose the day after to-morrow, if agreeable; and if some of the gentlemen are inclined to stalk Stronichie, we would expect them to-morrow evening to sleep at Dreumah; and start next morning; meeting by appointment at the foot of Corrieandhu—say at one o'clock: yourself and the ladies might ride, and, taking a short cut, would thus start from home comfortably after breakfast: I will take care that we sportsmen shall receive you punctually."

There was some discussion on this proposition. Glenbenrough knew the south peak of Corrieandhu; but the short cut to it through the hills from Glenbenrough he was not so sure of: he feared the ride would be too fatiguing for Marion and Julia,—what did they think? A few eloquent looks and half attempts to speak, showed that they thought it would be delightful, and not too fatiguing; and it ended in an agreement that the appearance or non-appearance of two of the three young men from Glenbenrough at Dreumah next evening should decide it. Shortly after, the neigh of the ponies in waiting gave farewell warning, and the Dreumah party started on their long ride home.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HILL OF CORRIEANDHU.

And by the watch-fire's glimmering light,
 Close by the hunter's side, was seen
 A huntress maid in beauty bright,
 All dropping wet her robes of green.

All dropping wet her garments seem,
 Chilled was her cheek, her bosom bare,
 As bending o'er her dying gleam,
 She wrung the moisture from her hair.

LORD RONALD'S "CORONACH."

NORMAL MAC ALASTAIR and Roderick Mac Neil, with shouldered guns and knapsacks, left Glenbenrough with the setting sun next evening; and the morning of the 4th September found hearts blithe and strong for a day to be spent on the hills. Suila; Methal, and Kelpie stood saddled at the door soon after breakfast, and two other ponies had been procured for the cousins; Glenbenrough and Patrick Mac Neil had also steeds, and the whole cavalcade started by eleven o'clock for the meet on the hill of Corrieandhu. Ewen Mackenzie went on foot as guide, Glenbenrough not having gone the route for very many years. The sky was rather overcast as they started, and the river showed, by its height and turbid colour, that much rain had fallen through the night. They paced the Roua Pass in solitary file, and on reaching the base on the other side, Ewen struck off to the right, and took a rocky path across the face of the country. Indeed the way seemed to depend on the instinct of their guide, for they rode on along barriers of hills and through tracts of heather for nearly two hours; nought seemed living in the wildness save themselves and the grouse, which rose with their hoarse crow of surprise ever and anon around them. Each of the girls had a large tartan plaid thrown across her knees in riding; which they found comfortable, for a chill, biting wind came sweeping down the ravines they passed.

At last the base of Corrieandhu was reached, and as they moved round towards the southern peak, shrill cries arose from the heights, and the next moment a troop of barefoot, gray-clad gillies swooped down upon them. They all dismounted, and began the ascent, throwing their plaids across their shoulders; the gillies remaining with the ponies. The gentile-

men were already at the peak, and luncheon was waiting : luncheon, with a savage rock for a table, an amphitheatre of hills for a dining hall, ptarmigan for spectators, and the coming storm for their music. As they clambered up the bleak mountain, wild gusts drove up hurrying mists, and the wind was piercing ; the girls scattered, and resolutely fought their way onward separately. Glenbenrough, however, kept by the side of Marion, and Patrick Mac Neil helped his sister Julia. Esmé was not so strong as Norah and Ishbel ; though buoyant when in perfect health, she could not struggle against fatigue as they would : a blonde seldom has the same power of endurance as a brunette ; as the white heather is more delicate than the purple. The rain having saturated the hill, their feet got wet ; Esmé felt a chill sensation creeping over her, and faint with cold, as they climbed higher and higher into the mist, she wished for a strong arm to help her. At last the summit was gained : Esmé stood at the edge of a precipice, on a crag forming part of a circular declivity of rocks that went down sheer and abrupt on every side to its base, on a round plat of heathery grass at the bottom : this was the edge of the hollowed peak of Corrieandhu, one of nature's most fantastic freaks in the Highlands. From far beneath the blue-gray smoke ascended from two huge fires burning in the clefts of rocks ; a tent constructed of birchen boughs and plaids stood near, and tartaned gillies and shaggy ponies were grouped around : it was one of the wildest, and most striking scenes Esmé had ever beheld. The mist hung like a curtain over the mouth of this huge rocky well, but all was clear within. Soon Esmé's eye caught Normal's well-known figure scrambling up the rock, followed quickly by Marchmoram and Harold ; and when they reached the summit, Glenbenrough and the other girls were standing there, with kindling eyes and heightened colour.

Marchmoram exclaimed against the treacherous climate of the north, as, almost without waiting to exchange salutations, they all began the rugged descent together ; for the quicker they could reach the rock-bound shelter far below, the better. Esmé took Normal's hand ; he wound her plaid tightly round her, and, bearing her strongly along, they half slid, half ran, to the bottom, where they found luxury, warmth, and comfort. Within the tent were seats cleverly made of elastic heather and plaids ; a table having been formed of stones piled in a square. Soon, from the blazing fires without, were carried by the

Englishmen's valets, Gupini and Greaves, hot soups, amber jellies, basted venison, truffled capons, hot-house fruits, and sparkling champagne. The girls laid aside their wideawakes and plaids, the gentlemen followed their example, and the party drew up to the lowly table. Mr. Auber was not there : in returning from shooting the day before, he had slipped on a stone and strained his knee, and so was obliged to remain inactive at home. The party was quite as merry as that one at the falls of Aultva : Mr. Marchmoram was in spirits, with a cordial smile and look for all ; his energy and tact made him matchless as a host. Glenbenrough enjoyed this strange scene, contrasting it with the times when he and Sir Alastair used to make this rocky hollow a sleeping lair, when out in their nightly watching of the deer. The sport had not been good that morning : Normal had shot a young stag, and Roderick wounded a hind ; but Marchmoram had missed a right and left shot in the pass of Stronichie.

The party might have sat at their feast for nigh an hour, when the curtain of the tent was lifted, and Ralph, the head game-keeper, put in his head, beckoning to Marchmoram, who rose and left the tent. In a few moments he returned, looking grave ; his lip had its look of decision, as he said,—

"The gillies are afraid of a September storm, Glenbenrough ; and, I think, if you come out and take a look at the sky, you will agree with me that the sooner we get to Dreumah the better. The ponies are in waiting ; but to attempt riding back to Glenbenrough would be impossible, for by the time you were on the Rona Pass, the wind would likely have strength to send horse and rider over into the river : we are but three miles from Dreumah."

Glenbenrough hastily left his seat, and the other gentlemen followed him. Opposite where the tent stood was a huge gap in the solid rock, and, stepping through it, a rugged tract of heather was seen winding among the surrounding hills, beyond which lay the lodge of Dreumah. To retrace the route to Glenbenrough, the circuit of Corrieandhu must have been made ; or they would have to climb up the steep sides of the hollow, and descend the hill to where they had first dismounted. The ponies of the young ladies stood now with other ponies at this gap, all crouched and huddled together in an uneasy way. The sky was of a leaden-blue colour, and a sighing, low, wailing sound came fitfully and mournfully overhead ; while from crevices of the hills a sort of misty smoke curled upwards.

Glenbenrough knew well that Marchmoram should be obeyed, and there was hurrying to saddle, mount, and depart.

Esmé had looked pale during lunch; she smiled and joined in talk with the merry voices, but it was evident she had been chilled by the blast during her solitary ascent. Norah and Ishbel had flushed in the subsequent warmth, but a hectic spot burnt bright on Esmé's cheek: she did not look well. In the first scramble of getting ready, Marchmoram had turned to her, and, in a low, hurried voice, desired her to reseat herself in the tent, and not move until he fetched her: he would take care of her. Glenbenrough and Marion Mac Neil rode off from the camp, a couple of Dreumah gillies walking beside them; Norah followed, and Harold, who had assisted in fastening on her plaid, sprang on a pony and rode at her side. Ishbel remained seated, and was among the last to leave with Esmé, Normal, and Marchmoram. It was momentarily becoming darker. Marchmoram turned to Normal and abruptly desired him to ride on with his cousins; but Normal sprang to the tent, where Esmé was sitting with her plaid wrapped round her.

"Come, Esmé," he exclaimed, "you will come with me."

"Mr. Marchmoram desired me to remain until he should fetch me, Normal: if you will take care of Ishbel, I am sure he will follow immediately."

"Do you choose so?" he cried in a tone of bitterness. "He is stronger, then, than I on the hill, as well as more conversable in a boat. Go, then!"

"No; wait, Normal! come you also."

"Not to be put under marching orders by him!" Normal exclaimed, running out, at the same moment that Marchmoram entered.

Marchmoram looked excited, with his bright hawk eyes and compressed thin lips, as hurriedly taking Esmé's hand, he led her out, and placed her on her pony, taking the bridle in his hand. Scarcely had they passed through the gap than, with a shrill, whistling shriek, the northern blast came rushing on, eddying round and round. The tent fell with a crash, burying the wrecks of the lunch; and the wind, catching plates and knives and forks, hurled them up into the air along with the burning wood from the fires. A pony, still standing in the hollow, was carried off his feet, and rolling over, fell with a groan. Normal had mounted his pony, and Ishbel was calling to him to come to her; Mr. Marchmoram evidently intended to

walk, as there was no pony in waiting for him. A second shriek of the tempest heralded the hurricane; the blast swirled in their faces, and the winds met to do battle on the hills. Esmé was deadly pale. Ewen Mackenzie stood by, with the swarthy Gupini, whose restless eyes just gleamed above a foreign-looking cloak drawn over his head and shoulders. On the first gust Ewen rushed from the Italian's side to seize the bridle of Esmé's pony, and she saw Gupini laugh disagreeably, as Marchmoram, calling loudly to Ralph, desired him to lead the pony, and, with irritable gesture, struck Ewen's hand with his hunting-whip. The Highlander glared on him, and almost shouted "O' Fuathach gu Siorriuth!" (oh, eternal hatred to you), then joined Normal and Ishbel as they advanced, and rode on.

How that dreary ride was passed Esmé scarcely knew, except that Marchmoram's strong arm saved her from falling, as they plunged and waded on knee deep through the heather, over rock and treacherous moss, and enveloped in dense mists. The wind, driving sleet and rain, swept past, and terrified game fled as they approached; the mountain torrents, now swollen into floods, rushed roaring down the heights, deluging the way before them. Esmé's hair had fallen loose upon her face and neck, and streamed in the blast; her eyes were closed, and she leant her head on Marchmoram's shoulder. She had faced many a Highland storm in winter, but she had never before succumbed like this: she felt as if her spirit was about to take flight on the winds—she thought she was dying. At last they emerged from a gorge, and the lodge of Dreumah lay within a hundred yards of them.

"Cheer up, Esmé," Marchmoram said, "you are home."

Those were almost the first words he had spoken; and his clear, bracing voice acted like magic: she felt strength imparted to her. The secret influence of his indomitable force of character was strong on her impressible temperament: his voice thrilled, whereas Auber's soothed. Esmé felt fast reviving as she was lifted off the saddle, and she walked into the lodge. Ishbel ran to her from the sitting-room.

"Oh, Esmé, how thoughtful of Mr. Marchmoram to have despatched a gillie to Glenbenrough, while we were at lunch, for change of dresses for us: imagine his thinking of it. He foresaw that we must come here and get wet before our arrival."

Norah was seated *en déshabille* in the room which had been,

prepared for them, and Esmé, having been disrobed of her damp plaid and dress, lay down; warm wine was brought to her, which she drank, and then fell asleep. When she awoke, almost all feelings of illness had passed off; her colour and her eyes were bright as in the morning: she felt ashamed of the faintness that had overcome her. How could she boast of Highland strength again? But she would show them the elasticity of it. Dinner being served, the dark red curtain was drawn across the windows. The rain and winds still beat and howled, but vainly: the fiercer the better now, since it heightened the sense of luxurious security, and the wilder they raved, the sooner must they be exhausted. The Glenbenrough party would not take their homeward way that night until the weather permitted. A September storm in the Highlands is but transient in its severity; and probably the moon would in a few hours rise smiling on earth and sky at peace.

Mr. Auber laughingly congratulated the Miss Mac Neils on their day's adventure; and the various stories of their scrambles when riding home made every one laugh at his neighbour. Glenbenrough was declared winner of the race; a sweepstakes must be subscribed: Norah's pony, Kelpie, had taken a leap which had so astonished Harold, that he allowed his old steed to stumble into a heather hole, which sent himself a flying leap over his horse's head. Esmé rather blushed when Mr. Auber asked her how it was she allowed Suila to be so much in the rear; and ere she could reply, Marchmoram answered shortly that he was to blame, as, being Miss Esmé's guide, and on foot, he retarded her progress. Esmé was seated on Mr. Auber's left hand, at the foot of the table; her father sat on the other side of her, and the small sitting-room looked bright in the light of sunny faces and wax-tapers. Yet there were two present who seemed in shadow. Marchmoram was absent and abrupt in manner; he looked round from the head of the table, spoke or listened in a desultory way, bit his lip, and in short was in one of his peculiar humours. Normal, who sat next his cousin Norah, was absolutely silent; and his brow was knit.

As the conversation became general, Auber lowered his voice and addressed Esmé.

"Do you know, Miss Esmé, you much reminded me of one of your own water-lilies, when you arrived to-day."

"I was wet and pale, Mr. Auber," she replied, smiling.

"Yes, you were like her in the Scotch ballad I read the other day at Glenbenrough:—

"Her seymar was the lily fair,
And her cheek the moss-rose in the shower,
And her voice like the distant melodye
That floats along the twilight sea.
She loved to haunt the lonely glen,
And kept far from the haunts of men;
Her holy hymns unheard to sing,
To suck the flowers and haunt the spring."

Esmé blushed, and said, "Often in summer I have felt overcome by heat, and have laid me down to sleep on the sunny rocks: but I never before felt from cold as I did to-day: it was faintness, I suppose. I never saw any one faint, and should dread it in myself, or another, almost as much as death."

"Had you fainted, Marchmoram would have restored you quickly, I have no doubt," Auber said with a smile: "it is such a common occurrence with our countrywomen. Few spend a season in London without exhaustion; for excitement and fatigue tell equally."

Excitement! ah, thought Esmé, how it must run its course of fire round London's highest circles, where minds like these give the tone to society. Auber was one of its stars, and as she talked, or listened to him, her imagination lived and revelled in elevated thoughts of poetic beauty, clothed in language befitting them. What must those feel who moved in spheres where many such stars shone together? Oh! what life, thus to enjoy the light of intellect and genius. But there are few like Esmé in those gay circles where Auber shone. In London he was but one of its agreeable and polished men; here, in this Highland shooting-box, his refinement and intellect were valued to the full: and as he talked, Esmé felt herself in a state of fascination. Her secret aspirations, her mental cravings, were gratified; for Auber touched the spring of her emotions, and evoked the music of her hidden thoughts: he had understood her at first sight. Esmé had long thirsted for converse like this: she knew many men in the Highlands, and liked some much; but she had never met with one like Auber, whose polished manner and tact (the grand secret, after all) tempered everything he did or said.

Marchmoram rose, and drew aside the red curtain from

the window; for Glenbenrough was anxious to be gone. The angry winds were hushed, the sky was calm, the moon was sailing mournfully through clouds of black and silver, and water-drops glistened tearfully over the face of the earth: a gloomy stillness prevailed. The girls exchanged their dresses for the riding skirts, which had been dried, and the gentlemen brought forth plaids and deer-stalking cloaks, which were donned by the fair travellers. Esmé stood by her pony, as Marchmoram threw over her a gray poncho, which he fastened with a pin which glittered in the moonlight. She asked him what it was? he answered,—

“It is the lightning gem. You are superstitious, so you must ever wear this when you ride at night. I will teach you what it means some other time.”

She saw in daylight that it was an opal, a beautiful one, rich in the rarest rainbow hues of one of the most perfect stones that ever left its Mexican mine. That opal became to Esmé as a loadstone.

Auber and Marchmoram sat opposite each other after dinner on the next evening. Harold had quitted the room. Auber's head was thrown slightly back, and a dreamy, half-roused smile played on his face as he spoke.

“Yes, I think I have found a jewel to admire among the rocks.”

“And admiring it, do you think of wearing it?” Marchmoram asked.

“Yes; carry it tenderly in my bosom while here, and lay it back in its native casket when I leave.”

“Untarnished?” Marchmoram pursued, with a slight twitch on his lip, and looking full at his friend.

“Untarnished? yes, I hope so. The change in our programme this season, Godfrey, has been capital. There is originality in our intercourse at Glenbenrough; and the days spent there, and by the Mac Neils here, suit my constitution exactly. Not being so young or robust as you and Harold, I find the deer revenging themselves: by Jove, I was stiff that first week!”

“Yes,” Marchmoram replied, speaking in his usual voice of quiet energy, “the society of the Mac Neils is better than the excitement of sport, which you and I only follow for the sake of the air here; and there is that intellectual little roe deer, whom one can follow from rock to rock, enjoying converse and exercise simultaneously.”

"I should like to see these little Highlanders placed where any latent *gaucherie* of manner, if it exist, must needs show itself," Auber said. "Ignorance of conventionality, I think, there must be: but I question whether it would be betrayed. I can fancy that young Esmé coming upon the world suddenly like a young fawn, in some open glade, raising her head startled, and then, looking round in graceful amazement, turn bounding back to her hills again."

"Aye," retorted Marchmoram bitterly, "you would show her evil, no doubt. Auber, your conscience, man, carries weight well."

Auber looked up with a smile, half contemptuous, though placid. "Why, Godfrey, have I very far outrun you? Our friendship and mutual confidence have lasted a pretty fair part of our lives."

"I introduced you to Glenbenrough," Marchmoram replied in a low voice, as Harold emerged from his room in his smoking jacket. Harold heard this concluding sentence, and exclaimed, as he threw himself into an arm-chair,

"The Miss Mac Neils on the tapis? I can't tell you how much I admire them! they are so fresh in beauty and manner—natural ladies, free from all fine ladyism. Miss Mac Neil at Almack's would look almost as *distinguée* as Lady Ida Beauregard: she is quite as fine a woman, but unconscious. She is a rose of the wilderness, whom diamonds would set off as well as dewdrops."

"Bravo, Harold!" cried Auber. "Well, you may be right. I have no doubt Miss Mac Neil, in length of pedigree, considers herself quite on an equality with Lady Ida; and that goes wonderfully far in enabling a woman to acquit herself: dignity is proper pride, and nature often goes as far as tact."

"Which of the Mac Neils do you admire most, Harold?" asked Marchmoram.

"Miss Mac Neil, I think: she stamps the family. She has such ease of manner, and is so pretty. I can scarcely believe her home education to have been wholly at Glenbenrough."

"Do you not admire the blonde, then?"

"Yes; she may be certainly more striking than her elder sister: she has rare eyes and hair. They are totally different; and, I am sure, their characters are as dissimilar: I might say the one was born under a comet, the other under a fixed star. Norah belongs to the latter, steadily bright and beautiful; but

Esmé Mac Neil is like a comet, uncertain in appearance, erratic in her course, and, perhaps, dangerous."

"How do you infer the latter?" Marchmoran asked.

"Well, by her eyes, very much. There is a world of passion in that blue: her very look denotes impulse, and we all know what mischief that may bring. However, there can't be much scope for it in these far-off Highlands."

Marchmoran and Auber made no reply, for the entrance of one of the valets with coffee interrupted the conversation; and, when again resumed, it opened in a very different direction. Auber took up the game book, and began adding leisurely some items; Marchmoran took up a French novel, which he soon appeared to be intently perusing; Harold pulled out a packet of unopened letters from his pocket, and proceeded to open, read, and muse over them, between soothing puffs of his cigar. He hastily glanced at two which were merely thanks from town acquaintances for boxes of grouse sent, and slightly frowned over the third, an ill-spelt production from his old favourite Yorkshire groom, saying he "feared the red mare was in for a bad thrush, she had been lame for a week, and the old pointer had died at last, after asking-loike to be shot herself for a fortnight back; and the fesants and partridges at Harold's Hall promised to be foine and plenty." He then opened a letter from his cousin, the fashionable Lady Ida Beauregard.

Basil Harold was a Yorkshireman, owner of Harold's Hall and all its domain, one of the richest spots in that rich county—both as regards rental and scenery. His mother and Lady Ida Beauregard's had been sisters: they were the Ladies Emma and Ida Sefton, daughters of the sixth Earl Trevor. The former had married Mr. Harold of Harold's Hall, M.P. for York; and the latter became tenth Duchess of Brittonberg. These sisters became mothers, each of an only child. Lady Emma Harold, the elder, had married some years before the duchess, and her son was first born; her health was delicate ever after, and the fifth year after his birth she died. Mr. Harold mourned with grief more like a widow's than a widower's: he had been a domestic Englishman, and that means one of the best and tenderest of husbands; his life and happiness were bound up in his wife's; he had loved and nursed her to the last, and refused to be comforted. He did not like to hear the tones of little Basil: they were so thrillingly like his mother's; even the child's laugh, borne in at the open

window, made him shrink, and excited his nerves. The Duchess of Brittonberg took little Basil to Britton Castle: he was her son-nephew, her pet, and Ida's playmate; and tenderly, luxuriously, were the little ones reared. Five years more passed, when Mr. Harold, who had been in delicate health, died; and ere Basil's tenth birthday had passed, the duchess died also. The duke mourned for her almost as keenly as Harold had done for his wife, but with grief of a different kind. Mr. Harold, who was weak, had feebly prostrated himself; the duke was made of other stuff: he would battle with his sorrow: he would shake off the depression.

Basil being ten years old when his father and his duchess-aunt both died, the duke brought him, without a moment's hesitation, from Britton, and left him at Eton; and returning home, gave his little motherless daughter into the doting care of the attached old nurse Max, who watched over her health and growth with most fond and faithful anxiety. The duke, leaving his daughter to nurse Max and the pure country air, went away to dissipate his grief; seeking excitement in the strife of politics in town. He found it so effectually, that the years flew past in forgetfulness of how they told at Britton; and it was not until after five or six years that he suddenly recollected his daughter must have nearly reached her fourteenth year: he then went down to see her. Nurse Max knew that the great secret of health was open air and exercise; and Lady Ida was allowed to roam about at will all the long summer day, and romp at pleasure on wintry nights through the long corridors of the castle. But nurse Max was old and infirm herself, and getting blind and deaf too; she could not follow the active vagaries of her darling charge, so she got a niece of her own, a fine strong healthy girl with gipsy blood in her veins, to come as companion for Lady Ida: and thus was her theory fully carried out. Lady Ida grew up straight as a reed, and with the colour of the wild rose. She and the gipsy girl wandered at will on the breezy heights, and down in the leafy nutting glades; they leapt their ponies over the crumbling garden walls, and bathed in the large, clear fish ponds. But Lady Ida loved reading as well as riding and running, and she had unlimited choice of the great ducal library. Nurse Max kept the key, but Lady Ida would take it for a week together. What that dangerous key unlocked to her, and how the stimulative poison extracted from those vast dusty shelves, worked with the naturally over sanguine blood, and the still more uncurbable example of her gipsy

friend, perhaps no other heart save Lady Ida's own might know. It became, some years later, closely shut.

When the duke went down and found his daughter had grown so wild, he received a great shock, and at once brought her away and sent her to a London school; then finding that a year thereafter it was necessary to expel her, and that she chose in the meantime to return to Britton, he was in despair about her. Lady Ida's childish life was now coming to its close. On her return from school she became more quiet at Britton; but so did the gipsy girl; they whispered now, where they formerly laughed. They stole out by moonlight through the wooded parks, and sang love songs to each other amongst the garden's tangled rose beds. Lady Ida kept the library key altogether, and a lamp burned at night at all hours in her room; it was whispered that that lamp shone strangely, too, through unusual parts of the house: lights were seen flickering from high deserted windows, and reflected sometimes along closed-up corridors. The steps of Lady Ida and her gipsy friend, though soft and quiet, were very restless; they were heard pacing at midnight as well as by day, and seen out in the moonlight as well as in the sunshine.

It is a critical turning-point, that in girlhood's life, betwixt fifteen and sixteen, when romance is ever apt to overpower prudence, and the quick pulse beats too rapidly for the strength: then it requires the vigilant hand and eye of maturer years to restrain and guide. Nurse Max was now wholly unable to rule or remonstrate; her gipsy niece scowled her down in her old arm-chair and scornfully bade her shut her aged eyes. There came, however, a sudden change. It was on a sultry August evening, when the woods of Britton were in their greenest glory of leaf, and the birds carolling their most luscious measures of song, that the duke, sitting down dusty and wearied in his London club, received a clumsy uncouth letter: the handwriting was large, crooked, and uncertain, like that of a young child or a very old woman. But no diplomatic missive could have probed and touched his feelings like that. With an exclamation of pain, he started up, crumpled the letter in his hand, ordered post horses, and paced restlessly until they were ready—forgetting even to send down to the house for "a pair" on an important question coming on that night—and dashed off for his daughter's country home. What it was that thus speedily roused him to action, prompting him to provide for her education with such energy, no one ever knew. The gipsy

girl was not at Britton when the duke arrived, and he carried Lady Ida away with him. Whether it was by influences from without, or from a mental change within, certain it is that from that date Lady Ida began to acquire that quiet stateliness of manner and aristocratic frigidity which afterwards characterised her. And when, a few years later, she graced the London fashionable world, a flower of perfection, delicate in bloom as the rarest exotic, the duke himself seemed to forget all the baneful past, and to fondly flatter himself that such early neglect had been for the best,—and showed the good effect of freedom and pure country atmosphere.

Lady Ida's letter to Harold extended to three sheets of note paper, faintly and closely written; but the decipherer of character in writing would have here found no very significant indication; however much Harold's amused and interested countenance, as he perused the lady-like hieroglyphics, might have testified to the writer's vivacity. He laughed outright at last, which gave Marchmoram (who had been observing him closely all the time, though apparently only absorbed in a French novel) the opportunity of looking up inquiringly.

"'All went merry as a marriage bell,' Marchmoram: Ida's description is capital. She says the white rose blushed 'celestial rosy red' beneath her veil; and Sir Francis, in his exuberance, drove away without his hat. On their return from Rome, Britton Castle will be first on the tour of wedding visits. Lady Sarnton will find Sarnton and Britton most conveniently near for the continuance of her and Ida's friendship."

"Lady Ida's friendship with that little country *débutante* last season was a social enigma to me," replied Marchmoram. "What sympathy could there exist betwixt her and your high and haughty cousin?"

"Ah! you don't know Ida. That freshness of the fields and daisies about Lady Sarnton would make her a pleasurable companion to Ida, whose original character was formed in the country, in her girlish days when the duke left her in his widowed home and betook him to the stirring life of politics. I have often smiled at reminiscences of our romping childhood, and wondered at the grace and beauty of that superstructure of manner so speedily raised a few years later, and which has carried her to this high pinnacle of fashion."

"What sort of child was she?"

"The wildest you can conceive. After my poor aunt's

death, you know, the duke left Britton a changed man. He sent me to school, and threw himself into political life ; becoming so absorbed in it, that for nearly six years his daughter remained under the sole care and guidance of an old nurse, Max—which means that Ida was left to her own—with the companionship of a wild, handsome gipsy niece of the nurse's. What a fine hot-blooded girl that Bella Norris was ! I well recollect the holidays I spent there, and my *tête-à-têtes* with that girl in the woods. I always fancy there must have been some outbreak on her part at last, for I never could get Ida to tell me her fate : she winced at her name when she grew up, and, despite my curiosity, I never dared urge Ida to gratify it.

“ Ida, until nearly her sixteenth year, only left Britton once. Did I ever tell you how she was sent for six months to school ? One day, in her fourteenth year, the duke arrived unexpectedly at Britton, and rode to the stable direct, intending to give his horse to a careful groom ; for he had ridden the latter part of the journey on a favourite hunter. As he rode into the yard loud peals of merriment from the stables assailed his ears, while clear and high above the rough sounds rose the silvery tones of his only daughter, also in high glee. There the young lady stood, surrounded by nearly a dozen satellites, comprising most of the gamekeepers, grooms, and stable-boys of the ducal establishment. One of her little sunburnt hands held the bridle of a tired chestnut pony, to whose saddle-girth hung a bloody hare, the prey of a gang of mongrel dogs of whom she was the sole whipper-in, while, with the other, she held back her flowing raven locks away from the smoke which she was puffing out of a short pipe. The duke uttered an exclamation of mingled astonishment and horror, and Ida, startled, let fall the pipe from her rosy lips, while her colour turned from red to pale. ‘ Papa, you have been a stranger to me ! ’ she quietly said ; as he, with remorse and internal bitterness, desired her to enter the house. She turned and kissed the pony's head, and, throwing loose its bridle, followed him in, with a firm step and Juno-like bearing. Within a fortnight, poor Ida found herself under the strict surveillance of the elegant Madame Decherné ; she was taught to dance by Benuto, to play by Cattini, to sing by Madame Allegri, and to smile, talk, and walk, by rigidly polite rule. After six months' tuition she returned for the holidays to Britton Castle, but at once acquiesced in her recal to London at their close. A few

nights after her return, while madame and the many governesses sat engaged at various lady-like occupations, a large party of the schoolgirls stood chattering round the fireplace, and they prettily recounted the various past holiday exploits: one, telling how she had danced two polkas with the handsome Lord Belgrave at a ball her married sister had taken her to; another describing her riding lessons on the paternal lawn; and a third how she had daily read and sang to a loved invalid aunt.

“ ‘And what was your occupation, Lady Ida?’ asked three or four at once.

“ ‘Taming a bull,’ replied Ida quickly and proudly.

“ ‘Oh, mon Dieu! Je n’ai plus d’espoir!’ shrieked Madame Decherné.

“ ‘Soon afterwards Ida left, with a final sentence of ‘hopeless’ on her unhappy case of neglected education: but we know how society has reversed that. Ida has often told me that she clapped her hands at every turn of the road which took her further away from London, exclaiming, ‘I knew I could disgust them! Now I shall become my own governess, when I choose; as every rational mortal in this world ought to be!’ ”

“ ‘And was that shown in the sequel?’ asked Marchmoram.

“ ‘I firmly believe it was,’ Harold replied. “ ‘For a year afterwards, while the duke was consulting and meditating how to introduce her to the influence of Parisian governesses and the companionship of educated girls, Ida lived out her reign of turbulence, and sowed the last of her wild oats. She and the gipsy girl roamed wilder than ever at Britton that autumn, I believe; for I was at the time reading in Wales. Then there was a break up, and a farewell. When next I saw Ida she had become an altered being; she was in London, poring over dry mental lore: she studied six hours a day. Her mind, vigorous as her body, now asserted its powers; everything presented to it was grasped; nothing came amiss, and steadily she trod the path of knowledge. With ripening years, the consciousness of her high birth and beauty was aroused; polished grace, pride, and dignity, were assumed; and Ida, the once wild and free, smiled gravely when Mademoiselle Privat told her she might yet be the woman to introduce Spartan manners into polite circles.”

“ ‘She is a woman of great talent; proud, cold, and imperious, but condescending enough to be very fascinating,’ *Marchmoram said, drily.*

"Ida has not what I call an earnest mind," replied Harold. "She has plenty of intelligence, but no intellectuality; some philosophy, but no imagination; she is enjoyable, but not lovable. *La voilà!*"

"Well done, Harold!" exclaimed Auber, laughingly; "that's a critical analysis of the *belle* of the season. Why there is not a man in town who does not thrill if she honour him with a bow, while you would scarcely do as much for a kiss!"

CHAPTER IX.

HOSPITALITY—SUNDAY AT GLENBENROUGH.

How many a day in blithe spring time,
How many a day in summer's prime,
I've, sauntering, whiled away the time
At the back o' Benachie!
Oh, Fortune's flowers wi' thorns are rife,
An' wealth is won wi' toil and strife;
Ae day gie me o' youthful life
At the back o' Benachie!

THE day after the lunch on the peak of Corrieandhu, Normal came down to breakfast with a note in his hand, brought by a gillie from Arduashien: a bearer in these districts is always a much swifter conveyance than the post. He said it was from his father, who desired his return that evening. "It is also time for me to go," he added, "for my shooting shoes are done for: I gave them to one of those English valets to get dried yesterday, and he must have put them on the gridiron; they cracked from heel to toe when I tried to put them on. They don't wear brogues at Dreumah, evidently."

Glenbenrough told him that as he must go, he should arrange with his father to be at the Dual Ghu within ten days: he might send Ewen over in a week to hear the exact date and plans.

"I think you had better not take Ewen to the Dual Ghu, Normal," Norah whispered; "he is disagreeable to Mr. Marchmoram."

"No, I won't," he replied. "I am afraid Ewen is going to join again in the working of that still, which Cameron the shepherd and old Ian Mohr have again set a-going."

"Oh! we must tell good Huistan to be on the look out," said Norah; "it is very rash and very wrong."

Esmé was at her favourite spring on the river bank when Normal left; and he found her there, to say good-by.

"Well, Esmé, not going to ride a bit of the way home with me this time?"

"No, Normal," she answered with a smile; "my climb yesterday was enough."

"Enough! Enough in every way? Well, well, we go on then in our different paths. For myself, I prefer a rugged and steep one any day to the smooth slippery flat; but it is diversity that keeps up the interest in our long pilgrimage here."

"I don't like a straight line, however cultured and ornamented, Normal," Esmé replied, looking up at him; "though I like going out of the old ways sometimes: we may lose a great deal of unguessed pleasure otherwise."

"I agree," he said; "but I like a good bold run of it at once, for myself: I am getting tired of home." And with a sigh, half bitter, half softened, Normal strode away.

Glenbenrough, always hospitable, having heard a few days later that young Lord Harry Temple had been upset in his dog-cart within a few miles from Dreumah, when on the way to Braemorin from his shooting box, and of his being carried to the lodge as the nearest residence, where he occupied Marchmoram's room there with a bruised head, wrote and entreated Marchmoram to come to Glenbenrough, where he might shoot unlimitedly over that ground, or his own, as it suited him. A reply came, thanking Glenbenrough for his invitation, and accepting it; accordingly, by dinner time Marchmoram had arrived. He was under Glenbenrough's roof tree now, and when he retired to his large airy old room that night, he could not but feel himself as much at home as a born Highland cousin. The Strathshielie party were to leave two days after, as Lady Mac Neil required her children's assistance in entertaining expected guests; so, next day, Marchmoram and the young Mac Neils beat the river woods, and had a battue along the banks. That night he said good-by to Marion and Julia, for he was to be up by the dawn next morning, deer-stalking on a distant beat. He was far out of sight when the four cousins drove away, waving their adieus to Glenbenrough and his daughters. The family party were now alone, and Marchmoram became intimate at Glenbenrough: almost like a brother. He did not shoot much after the first two days; but

spent his time in the open air with the three girls. When Glenbenrough was in his writing-room, or away with his factor at a sheep farm some ten or twelve miles off, Marchmoram was rowing on the river, or scrambling on the rocks, or romping through the garden.

Esmé and Ishbel loved romping—yes, rustic romping: but that word bears very different meanings. Their blood coursed their veins like quicksilver in their bracing native air; they had always been accustomed to activity, and life was buoyant in their limbs. All mountaineers enjoy dancing: it seems necessary to them; and no dancing is more demonstrative than that of the Highlands. Esmé and Ishbel had the national temperament, and were not checked in it either by precept or example; though Norah, being graver, did not share in the wild childish glee which she allowed to them. Marchmoram joined Esmé in running races down the Roua Pass, and in trying feats of horsemanship. She and Ishbel also played at deer-stalking, circumventing him on the hills while he went in search; then a flying pursuit would take place, and woe betide Marchmoram if his footing failed in following over rock and water: the ringing laughter would reach Norah where she sat. There was excitement in this, and Marchmoram's eye flashed and darkened in these merry hours: his constitution required impetus, and he enjoyed it here, both morally and physically. At a little distance from the birchen bower on the river bank, where the fishing-rods were kept, an old gray ruined cross was upreared, which was said to have been erected to an Irish monk who had died there some six or seven hundred years before. Almost at the foot, and under its shadow, a clear spring bubbled up, trickling down to the river. This was Esmé's spring: she used daily to go there with a small crystal jug, which she filled for use at dinner. Marchmoram would occasionally go there with her and Ishbel; and much waste was there of that precious water on those days. Esmé prudently changed her crystal jug for one of stone, during Marchmoram's stay, for she feared some accident to the former.

Though Marchmoram thus became admitted intimately into the girlish circle, still there was a certain secret influence of restraint, imperceptible but felt, in their intercourse. When he became excited, his face worked too strongly for merry play: there was too much fire in that sunshine. The nature of the lion showed itself in those gambols: the flash of his

eye when baffled, or the energy of his sudden spring, would startle Ishbel with a momentary sense of fear. They felt in their play with him as if he was too strong and powerful to make it wholly safe. Then when he sat in silence in the stillness of evening, they noted his observant eye and compressed lip, and Norah would feel as if she could not too carefully study to avoid aught that might jar his feelings or provoke criticism; while little Ishbel never would have dared a defiant smile after a passing frown on that massive brow. His was the influence of a character made for rule, energy, and command; a character born to achieve success. But as yet the giant Ambition, which was henceforth to command these vassal gifts, sat quietly enthroned, possessor of that restless soul. Ambition, the remorseless power which hurries on its possessor, heedless of love, memory, and pity, though destined to rule Marchmoram, its rival passion might make one struggle yet.

Esmé was the one who least felt the outward effect of Marchmoram's sterner influence. She was fearless: knowing his strength, yet fearing it not: she was like Una with the lion, his strength was health to her, and might be shelter. She learned to delight in his force: in his rugged decision and clear-shaped views. Marchmoram was to Esmé the master mind; with Auber she had felt purely intellectual delight, but she perceived a sensible difference in communion with Marchmoram.

Sunday arrived. Glenbenrough, in common with most Scotchmen, liked to follow strictly the commandment to keep that day holy, and though the parish church was nigh four miles from the house, he and his daughters always walked to service there when practicable; or, if not, they remained at home, thus avoiding labour to man or beast. This was a bright autumn morning, and they all started after breakfast; the girls carried a Bible each, and wore bonnets instead of their usual hats or wideawakes. The church was also the parish church of Dreumah; but the distance thence being very much greater than from Glenbenrough, the sportsmen rarely, if ever, attended it. It was a small, bleak building, on the edge of a large sullen loch, on whose banks a few dark pines were scattered. The manse, a thin, cold house, lay opposite. The Gaelic service was not concluded when they arrived, and the English congregation were assembled in the little churchyard. The women, wrapped in their home-spun blue cloaks,

sat on the tomb-stones; generally with their heads buried in their cloaks, and faces bent reverently to the earth. The men, in their shepherd plaids, stood in groups, silently and abstractedly; or leant against the walls, their eyes covered by their sun-burnt hands. There was no move, and scarce any attention paid, as the family of Glenbenrough entered the enclosure; even Florh Mackenzie, who was seated there, only looked up with a quiet passing smile of recognition. The bell tolled forth, and out came the Gaelic congregation. As the party from Glenbenrough turned to enter, Esmé showed Marchmoram a little gold vinaigrette.

"This is my Sunday luxury," she said, "and don't you be too proud to ask for it by-and-by. A Highland church, which is never aired, is trying to the nerves, I assure you."

Marchmoram agreed with Esmé at a later period, though from a different cause. Dr. Macconochie preached better in Gaelic than in English: he was profuse in verbiage, but frequently misapplied his words painfully; and as he swelled out his sentences, striking ponderous blows upon his desk as he hurled down dogma for doctrine, Marchmoram bit his lip to restrain his risibility. It is said that, with their Calvinistic tendency, a congregation of the Highland lower classes will benefit by unintelligible enthusiasm in the pulpit; so that the more violent and inflated the delivery, the more do they bow to the exhortation conveyed in demonstrative threats of voice and gesture. Weather-beaten faces of men and women gazed up in reverent awe, while young lads and lasses sat with open mouth and vacant eye, as Dr. Macconochie preached to them. Miss Christy Macpherson was seated in the gallery, and gazed full upon the Glenbenrough seat near the pulpit. The psalm being given out, a long, low, canine chorus from shepherds' dogs scattered through the church, arose with the voice of the people, and howls in discord mingled with the earnest, untuneful singing. The noise was so great that a low laugh, which escaped Esmé as she caught sight of Marchmoram's agonised face, was unheard; but Miss Christy saw it, and shook her head in well-timed rebuke, from the gallery.

Service over, there was a small gathering of friendly groups in the churchyard, ere all turned homeward. Norah joined Mrs. Macconochie, and Dr. Macconochie himself appeared, hastily putting on his great coat, and urging Glenbenrough to come to the manse for a glass of wine. Miss Christy came hastening up, saying,

"'Deed, Dr. Macconochie, ye suld tak' Miss Esmé an' put her on repentance stool!—to see her laughing at puir dumb dogs for youling, making a scandal afore the meenister!"

"I have no doubt," he said in a pompous half Celtic-Saxon accent, "if Miss Esmé Mac Neil did amiss, she is penitentiary! We all do amiss: we must all mend our breaches—mend ye your breaches."

"Ye need na say yon to kilted lads!" retorted Miss Christy, with a grin.

Dr. Macconochie cast a glance of severe rebuke, and said with asperity, turning also towards Marchmoram, "This is scandal and indecency too."

Miss Christy reddened angrily. "He's a rael time server," she muttered; and shortly afterwards, as the Glenbenrough party were moving off, she maliciously asked, "Is't true ye've got a requisition to the grand living o' Perth, Dr. Macconochie?"

"Yes, Miss Macphairson, the Lord has called me."

"Weel, weel," she answered drily; "but do you ken, I'm thinking if he had called ye frae Perth to Loochamoke here, instead o' calling ye frae this to Perth, ye wad just never have let on that ye heard him!" Then with a sardonic laugh she bustled off.

The party returned by a different route, over the brow of a heathery hill, and passed close to the free church congregation at their devotions in the open air. The scene was highly picturesque, and Glenbenrough stopped for a few moments. The clergyman, a thin, pale young man, stood on a grassy knoll, and his voice echoed clearly in the hushed stillness around; only broken now and then by a short, nervous cough, as he addressed the people in Gaelic. When the assembled voices rose in the psalm, loud, wild, and irregular, the sound floated up, and, echoed by the rocks and heard through quivering trees, the music sounded grand, and fitting to the worshippers and the day. This second service had had more vitality than the previous one.

Marchmoram, in his easy intimacy, now seemed almost a second host at Glenbenrough; his wishes appeared to influence everything, and his manner had all the implied feeling of being in a second home: with Norah he was scrupulous as ever in strict courtesy and attention, but Esmé and Ishbel he treated more as playful younger sisters. When with Auber, Esmé's *imagination* revelled in pensive sentiment, under the influence

of his soft low voice ; but in Marchmoram's society it bounded into life and spirit. Her strength of will and opinion came out to do laughing battle with his, and her ready wit struck fire against his solid intellect. Every one at table looked up in amused or interested attention, when Marchmoram and Esmé thus encountered ; and the excitability of both in argument gave piquancy to the contest, which Auber enjoyed especially. It was a beautiful night ; and Harold and Auber had ordered the dog-cart, meaning to return to Dreumah, driving round by the bridge, and, walking across the Roua Pass, meet the "trap" on the other side. Esmé was absorbed, gazing on the moonbeams as they palely illumined her face where she stood at the window ; at last she whispered to Norah, and then turning to Marchmoram, asked, in the beseeching voice of a child, if they might not all walk up the Roua Pass with the two gentlemen : she seemed to think assent or refusal lay with him. To have asked Glenbenrough almost any request was to be sure of its gratification. Marchmoram gave one of his half smiles, and she darted to the door, calling out to her father that they were going for a moonlight walk, but his daughters would be soon back if they met no brownies or bogles on the way.

Auber and Harold were in the hall putting on their stalking cloaks ; the three girls quickly covered themselves with plaids lying there also ; and then with Marchmoram they all sallied out. Glenbenrough remained by the fire ; but half-an-hour later stole out on tip-toe, and, smiling like a schoolboy at the idea, carried a sheet under his arm, which, when he reached the foot of the Roua Pass, he threw over him, and there stood, like a stone statue amongst the trees, until the return of the party. The moon lit the path up the hill, and shone so brightly as to show distinctly the hues and tints of purple heather and gray rocks, and the green and amber beauty of the changing ferns. Oh ! beautiful and solemn, awful even to sublimity, is a starry light on the Highland hills. Those peaked towers of strength rising like silvered pinnacles in the moonlight, the sheeted torrents clothing their sides with glittering star-sprinkled foam ; range upon range of everlasting hills looming one above another with giant cloud-shadows hurrying past as if on some direful purpose ! The eagle with closed eyes rests on the summit, and the deer crouches beneath under the shade of the weeping birches swaying their tendrils with mournful music to the solemn sighing of the stately pines. The precipice of the Roua Pass glowed red as blood in the moonlight, and the

water beneath murmured, as it flowed darkly in the shadow of the rocks.

Esmé, with Auber by her side, was last of the group ascending the hill. Marchmoram was in advance, followed by Ishbel; and Norah's white dress fluttered high above, against Harold's dark cloak.

"This is beautiful, Esmé," Auber said in his lowest, softest tone; "but are all your wishes limited to the enjoyment of beauty like this? Have you no farther desires?"

"I know no other place on earth save the Highlands," Esmé said; "and all my wishes beyond it are impossible ones."

"Tell me them."

"Well," replied Esmé, smiling, her blue eyes dilating as she looked up and met Auber's eager gaze; "I should like the power of invisibility: that I might take wings and fly—seeing, but unseen—where I listed."

"And what life would you pursue?"

"I fear, a mixed life: I should wish it to be good; but I might encounter evil."

"To enjoy the power you would be sure to meet evil, Esmé: temptation might be irresistible. I should like to be invisible with you, Esmé!"

As he spoke he lifted the end of her plaid, which had fallen on the path, and while replacing it round her waist, he gave her a momentary pressure. She raised her eyes suddenly to his, and he looked down with a tender deprecation, as he continued speaking.

"Were I to become very ill, Esmé—as I sometimes do—and to lie languishing for pity and a gentle voice, and you were able to act as if with that power of invisibility, would you come and nurse me and give me sympathy? You know I never had a sister, and I have no one who would do such a kindness to me."

"Yes, I would come," Esmé answered. She spoke in innocence, pure and stainless as the moonlight streaming on them both; but her heart throbbed, and she felt a fascinating power in the earnest pleading tone of his voice.

He took her hand and drew her near to him. His influence was paramount over Esmé: it spoke in his soft subdued voice, and beamed in the light of his kindling eye. They were on the verge of the Pass. Esmé trembled all over; but the next instant she withdrew her hand, and then a blush, deep and *burning as sunset glow*, suddenly suffused face, neck, and brow,

as she saw the stern face of Marchmoram before her : he had turned on the other side of the Pass. Auber bit his lip ; but, quick as thought, he again took Esmé's hand and pressed it, as if parting from her ; glancing at Marchmoram with a peculiar look as they passed each other on the narrow path. In the descent to Glenbenrough, Esmé again was last : she lingered, and walked slowly. Ishbel ran on before, skipping like a playful kid over the rocks ; and Marchmoram walked silently by Norah. Esmé felt that Marchmoram's quick eye was not to be deceived, and that he had seen what had passed between her and Auber : she felt mingled sensations of shame and pride, guiltiness and annoyance ; but then she thought Marchmoram would forget it. What did it matter to him ?

At the foot of the Roua Pass all three were startled by the dreadful shriek which Ishbel gave as she rushed past the tree where Glenbenrough stood in his sheet ; but the groan he attempted broke down in his hearty laugh, and exclamations of " Papa, papa," from his daughters, showed that he was detected.

Esmé sat in a low chair before the fire in her room, brushing her hair, which hung in a golden shower about her : it curled naturally, and at night she merely braided it back in one thick roll. Esmé and Ishbel's rooms, which were small, though on the drawing-room floor, opened into each other, and they were furnished much alike : a low tent bedstead with muslin curtains stood opposite the window, which looked upon the Roua Pass and the strange peak of the Craighrisht hill beyond. The furniture was old and simple : all the chairs in the room were of different shapes ; the toilet table was built into the recess of the window, and an antique fan-shaped looking-glass stood on it ; presses beneath serving for chests of drawers, and a low table, covered with a bright-coloured plaid, supported their books and desks. The carpets of the rooms were curious and comfortable, being the gift of Florh, who had spun them herself : they were very thick tartan, of the Mackenzie pattern, and soft to the foot as a Turkey rug. Esmé had many pictures, principally in water-colours, painted by her mother, hung upon the walls of her room ; and above the frame of each was a bouquet of heather and deer's-grass, which retain their colour for months at a time. Ishbel also had her walls ornamented with deer's-grass, and the post of her tent bedstead was crowned by a sweet bunch of bog myrtle. Norah's room, of which she was sole occupant, was on the higher

flight; next hers was the apartment her mother had died in, and which Glenbenrough had quitted since that sad event, preferring a room near his study. Norah's room was large and airy, and furnished so as to suit all her tastes. It contained a book-case, and a stand with greenhouse plants stood in one of the windows; prints and paintings, with a crayon likeness of her mother, adorned the walls; and an old oak cabinet held a stock of comforts and necessaries for the poor. The curtains of her bedstead were curious, being made of silk patchwork, sewn into tapestry devices; the work of the fair hands of old and young ancestors, long, long since crumbled into dust. A screen of beautiful antique workmanship half encompassed the fireplace; and seated within its shadow Norah now sat, buried in reverie. She arose at last, and, taking her candle, went downstairs to Esmé's room. It was late, but a light still streamed beneath Marchmoram's door, which was opposite. Norah sat down by Esmé, and taking the brush from her hand, continued the dressing of her hair for her, while both sisters talked together.

"We shall miss Mr. Marchmoram much when he leaves, Esmé. I did not expect, that first day at Dreumah, that so short a time after we should have become thus intimate."

"No, indeed! What pleasure we have had since then. I only feel that were life to go always on in such a round, it would satisfy us too much with the present, Norah. We never held converse with men like these before: young Seatoune, and Comhfern, and Breesah, are all men of family and position, handsome, agreeable, and educated; and yet we would make unfavourable comparisons now."

"These men, I suppose, have the highest polish that society can give, Esmé; and in thus knowing them, we must feel it to be but a rare and passing pleasure: nowhere else in Scotland could we know men like them; and even in England, depend on it, these men rank high. In the Lowlands, or in an Edinburgh ball-room, how proud we should feel of our handsome chiefs and cousins, and how, in our eyes, they would tower above the everyday people there; but here, we find their free-born spirits do not bear comparison with the tutored ease of these men, with whom we feel under no restraint, and have more easy enjoyment in their society than in that of men whom we know much better. Did you not feel to-night as if you could have walked on to Dreumah with *them, as with brothers?*"

Norah could not see the smile that passed over the face of Esmé (who thought of Auber), as she replied,—

"Yes, when all together, and at Dreumah, one thoroughly felt this, Norah; but I think Mr. Marchmoram's pervading influence creates much of this feeling: he seems always as if we were under his care, and we feel safe in the guardianship of his strength."

"He has plenty of strength, social and intellectual: he is a man of decision in all he does or says. I notice it in everything."

The figures of the two girls would have made a pretty picture as they sat with their eyes fixed on the glowing embers; Norah's regular features were pale in their composure as she shaded her soft dark eyes with her hand; Esmé in her loose white robe and golden hair, like a visitant from spirit-land; but her face was not sufficiently peaceful: a bright pink burnt in the cheek, and her eyes glowed with a lurid brightness. She spoke first, after a short silence.

"Have you talked much with Mr. Auber, Norah?"

"No: less than with Mr. Marchmoram and Mr. Harold; but I have occasionally heard part of your strange conversations with him. Esmé, dear child, Mr. Auber is a very fascinating man;" and as she paused hesitatingly, Esmé quickly interposed,—

"Well, I have not spoken much to Mr. Harold, but I think him charming."

A slight blush coloured Norah's face, as, in her turn, she interrupted Esmé by saying, "We will talk of him afterwards: I want first to give you my idea of Mr. Auber. He is a fascinating man of cultivated mind and manners, and he has imagination; but, unless I am deceived, there is very little heart in him. I have seen a smile sweet as sunshine pass and leave an expression cold as lead, and one of his impassioned glances succeeded by a look as worn out as that of the most *blasé* man of the world."

Esmé looked up startled. These were new ideas to her. What answer could she give? At this moment the owls from the old trees in front of the house began shrieking, and the clock struck twelve. Norah arose, saying she feared her fire was out, and went into Ishbel's room; she kissed her sleeping sister, and sighed. On her returning to go upstairs, Esmé said, with a smile—"Norah, I think Mr. Harold admires you. Marion and Julia thought it also,"

"How could you think so?"

"Why, in one way it would be unnatural if he did not. You know you are pretty; and he evidently likes your society: he seeks it."

"Oh! he knows I am the eldest sister of the family."

"And he is the youngest of the Dreumah party! No, that is not it: it is because he finds that you suit him. With his own truthfulness, and well regulated mind, he can estimate yours. I think one has only to look at Mr. Harold while you and he talk together, to see that his character is one formed on principle. I have noticed that, though he has a keen sense of the ludicrous, and is observant of motive and action, yet he is utterly free from cynicism: his fine-tempered smile and thoughtful brow show that he looks honestly and kindly on the world, and that he has a naturally good disposition."

"Well, I would have imagined you had been the most in his society; you speak so fully of him!" Norah said, smiling. "But everything you say, I feel is borne out. There is a truthful simplicity about Mr. Harold that 'he who runs may read.' He is a man of principle—religious principle—I am sure; and, after all, that is the great point, dear Esmé."

"Yes," said Esmé, thoughtfully: "I admire this abstract truth and goodness, Norah; but I have not the inclination to approach it. I close my eyes, and with bowed head steal silently, reverently past the pure light of religious principle; I love it, but I am too feverish to approach that light. My nature, dear Norah, is so different from yours."

Esmé ceased, and an indescribably mournful smile was on her face. Norah's eyes filled with tears as she turned and gazed on her sister.

"The time is coming, I trust, dear Esmé, when strength will be given. You are yet young and impulsive; but years will bring the strength which then will carry you on higher and higher towards that light before which all lesser lights are dimmed."

"Yes, Norah," said Esmé, with sudden earnest tone; "I know it. Without religion, intellect but flies blindfold."

"Esmé, you remember the French saying, 'Il y a des gens défaits avec du mérite, et d'autres qui plaisent avec des défauts!' I find it useful for myself, from my being apt to disregard it; but though safe with me, it does not do for you to *act on its truth too much.*"

"Ah!" replied Esmé, smiling; "I am afraid I have generally dwelt on the last fact too much."

The sisters exchanged good-night; but long after Norah had fallen asleep, a small, restless footfall might be heard in Esmé's room, and a low voice occasionally murmuring incoherent sentences: such as,

"Norah, why don't we speak thus oftener?"—"Darkness, darkness!"—"Godfrey Marchmoram!"—"Oh, Normal! we have dwelt so long on the same page! what is to be first—what last?"

CHAPTER X.

LOVE AND INTRIGUE.

What means a' this scorning, my lassie?
An' what means thae look o' disdain?
It was nae your wont to be saucy;
It is nae your nature I ken.

I'm but a puir hand at beseeching,
And words hae nae mony to spare.—GILFILLAN.

ON one of the Dreumah hills, within sight of the Lodge, lived a shepherd named Donald Cameron, in a cottage with his only daughter Jeanie and his old father Ian Mohr. The latter was one of the few remaining grandsires who could tell of former times, which he fondly recalled, when in the Highlands bird and beast roamed free, and unclaimed save by those who could match the stag in swiftness of foot; when lairds knew not of shooting-rents, dreamt not of emigration, and dealt not with strangers; and when clansmen were still clansmen to each other. Old Ian Mohr, when a lad, had swam across Loch Nightach in icy winter neck and neck beside the grand uncle of Glenbenrough, carrying lighted pine torches to fire the house of a recusant tenant. It was he who saved the life of his present laird's mother when a girl from the fury of a maddened Highland bull, by leaping across the chasm of Corloo Craig, with her in his arms; and when the country people spoke of the death of the Edinburgh writer, who was shot at the front door of Arduashien as he stood there with a writ against Normal's great grandfather, old Ian always muttered, "Our bullet was sure! our bullet was sure!" Ian Mohr, still, at the age of eighty-three, could shoot a deer and spear a salmon with the surest aim. It was wondrous

to see his wrinkled old head watching immovably a pass, his small keen eyes far sighted as in youth, and his old puckered hands quite untremulous as they held the double gun, with his finger on the trigger. His keenness in sport was the ruling passion that seemed to stave off infirmity; and the whole district of young and old pointed almost reverently to the veteran Ian Mohr—an emblem of the prowess of ancient days—whose rugged strength seemed likely yet to last through many winters.

He had nearly died two years before the events of this story, owing to the advent of the Dreumah party. Ian Mohr after a lifetime's liberty, found himself suddenly debarred from fishing and shooting: English gamekeepers pounced down upon him by the water's edge, and, after sharp personal conflict, broke his beloved birchen scobie, or trout rod; in stalking a deer, he saw himself stalked, and the deer sent flying out of range; and then sharp messages came down to his cottage, and he was told he would be sent to the distant county jail. The privation of his loved sports nearly broke the old man's heart; he took to his low, dark bed in the recess of the wall, and turning his face away said he wished to die: he had lived too long, since these times were come. For a week he scarcely ate or drank, and loudly and bitterly was sympathy expressed in many a Gaelic voice: however, Ian Mohr was yet too strong. One morning at early sunrise his grand-daughter laid, as if accidentally, a new scobie on the bed, and she and her father saw him grasp it eagerly; he got up, and crept out of the house, and in an hour returned, with a broad grin brightening his wrinkled face. He asked for his breakfast, and then whispered to the lassie to go to the river bank, where she found a salmon and four large trout hidden carefully in some reeds. From that day he recovered: a new impetus seemed given to his life. The fact of the sassenachs calling sport poaching delighted and excited him: he would fish and shoot in spite of them, and outwit them too by cunning and speed. Glenbenrough and other neighbouring lairds propitiated the forbearance of the English sporting tenants; and even the gamekeepers, entering into the spirit of the old man's defiant pursuit of sport, and amused by his eccentric contempt of the game-laws, enhanced his pleasures a hundredfold by pretending redoubled vigilance, and constant reints of discomfited pursuit. Had Ian discovered that this was the case, and that he was not poaching in earnest,

he would have sunk completely; for his pride would have utterly rebelled against accepting permission from these new innovators of the soil: the only zest left to him now was that of following his game in spite of them.

Jeanie Cameron was a rosy-cheeked, dark-eyed girl, who from her early years, when she had attended the parish school with Ewen Mackenzie, had in a manner been betrothed to him; but, like many Scotch courtships it was one more steady in length of duration than demonstrative in warmth of feeling. Florh, with unusual justice towards her elder son Huistan, always told Ewen she could not give him the necessary plenishing for a house, nor assistance in money, until she saw his elder brother with a wife of his own. Whenever this desirable event should take place (and it was one of which there seemed no present probability), she would retire with her savings to a croft of her own, and receive Ewen and Jeanie to share bread and shelter with her. Ewen's love for Jeanie was deep; but divided almost equally with that for his mother and his young master, Arduashien: yet the sullenness of his nature showed in this too; and many roughnesses troubled the current of his love, which rarely ran smooth. One day at noon, towards the end of September, Ewen entered Jeanie's cottage: he was on his way from Arduashien to Glenbenrough, but had made a *détour* so as to visit his love, whom he had scarcely met since the days of his Dreumah gillieship. Jeanie was spinning at her wheel as he entered. Their greeting and conversation was in Gaelic, but might be pretty closely translated as follows:

"An' what brought ye here the day, lad?" Jeanie asked, looking up and showing no pleasurable surprise.

"My feet, lass," Ewen replied sulkily, as he removed his cap and seated himself by the fire: "is na a sight o' me guid for sair een?"

"Aye, but mine were na sair for you," Jeanie retorted. This was a strange turn of the tables for Ewen: generally on his side lay the ill-humour, requiring forbearance from his mistress. He answered to her retort,

"An' what for no?"

"Ye did na stay lang near me when it was in your power, Ewen."

He scowled darkly and replied with vehemence, "No, an' is it you that wad hae me serve the sassenach, lick his hand like a dog, an' do his bidding? No! not for sako o' life, woman."

He raised his hand to me once—not lang syne—it'll no be forgot : let him take care, or an hour may come when my arm might upraise and hurl him like a gled o'er the steepest craig in the north ! ”

“ Is it Mr. Marchmoram ? He's a fine gentleman, and a purty man,” Jeanie said drily.

Ewen gave her a lowering look : “ An' what ken ye o' him ? ”

“ I ken he's aye ceevil spoken and kind to the poor, an' that there's wealth o' guid about him.”

“ Has he gien you any o' it ? Was it his kindness that sent the old man's back to the wa' ? . Will Ian Mohr lay his gun at the feet of the sassenach till he trample it ? ”

“ Grandfather is doited against all new comers ; an' ye ken weel it's to humour him, an' frae kindness, that the keepers dinna get leave to hinder him more : Mr. Marchmoram is kind an' guid.”

“ By my throth, I think ye must hae ta'en my place in his service ! ” Ewen retorted with a bitter sneer.

“ That would be piper's news indeed,” Jeanie replied, and tossing her head in time to the measure, she burst forth into a Gaelic song :

“ Twine weel the bonny tweal,
Twist weel the plaidie;
O' I'll loe the laddie weel
That'll wear this tartan plaidie.”

“ I'm going now, wi' your leave, the way o' Dreumah to see is my father coming,” and rising from her wheel, she turned to the door.

Ewen, snatching up his cap, brushed past her, saying,

“ Lass, had I stayed at Dreumah ye wad hae liked it, then ? I value the love and the pride that ye maun have sae lang had in me ! I loe not you, nor them, the better for it ! ”

Without pausing for reply, Ewen pursued swiftly the way towards Lochandhu. He had not gone far when he suddenly stopped, jerked his plaid irritably on to the shoulder, hesitated a moment, and then retraced his course partly, by going in a slanting direction across the hills upwards. After about a mile's steep rough ascent he topped one of them, and began a precipitous descent upon Loch Nightach, which lay beneath ; the water looking dark, cold, and sullen as usual. Ewen went scrambling and stumbling down, but straight as an arrow, for the water's edge ; arrived there, he sat down, and, with lowering brow, glanced warily far and near on all around. It was at any time a gloomy eerie place : nature on a gigantic

scale lay dark-hued there. Not a vestige of human life was seen, nor was there an echo of human sound; some distant black-faced sheep stared at him from the opposite hills, and the bay of a kenneled hound at Dreumah occasionally broke the stillness. The Lodge lay to the back of the Loch, quite out of view. Ewen began deliberately to strip himself, and then he plunged into the water, which was many fathom deep at the edge: the bank was high and gravelly, but it shelved there. He went swimming fast for about a hundred yards, until a little inlet appeared in the almost perpendicular side, where a large birch which grew above sent its tendrils sweeping so far down to the water's edge that they hid the opening from any but a close view. Into this Ewen went, and standing waist deep in the water he dislodged a large stone above his head; a puff of smoke issued forth from the aperture, and a guttural exclamation in Gaelic along with it.

"Sa caraid ha an!" ("It's a friend,") replied Ewen quietly, and immediately a brawny arm, naked and covered with reddish hair, was thrust out, and Ewen, clinging to it, partly clambered and was partly dragged in.

It was a large low cave, perfectly dry and air-tight, formed in the steep base of the hill; the ground was covered with withered heather, and heaps of it, piled with other brushwood and peat, lay against the wall. A large smouldering turf fire burnt in the centre, and holes bored in the roof amongst the roots of the birch tree above allowed the smoke to escape, so that it was not visible amidst the light thick foliage. Seated beside a large vat of fresh distilled spirit was old John Mohr, Jeanie Cameron's grandfather, his snowy hair and beard uncombed straggling over his bending shoulders; his old brown plaid, smelling strong of peat reek, was spread before him, and he was emptying out soaking bags of steeped barley upon it. The moment Ewen's footing within was fairly attained, Donald Cameron again plunged his naked arms into the tub of soft water, in which the barley was shortly to be immersed. He was a thick-set, red-whiskered, red-faced, short-nosed Highlander, with a stolid, taciturn expression, but a twinkle in the eye that showed he was far from being asleep to what was going on around him. He might have been noticed as one of the most austere attentive on any Sunday at Lochnamoke Church; and Dr. Macconochie had a high opinion of him, as a saving, self-denying, zealous Presbyterian. Donald was taciturn by habit, but the necessary quiet of a smuggling den rendered

him especially so here. The size of the vats and of the copper pan on the fire, and the evident skill and labour bestowed on the process of distillation, showed on what a complete and extensive scale work was carried on. A stream of water which formerly trickled overhead into the Loch, had been diverted from its course into the cave, and fell in a small waterfall over great part of the worm, which extended from the copper pan on the fire to a large covered vessel in a corner.

Ewen, who, since his entrance, had not spoken to either until he had dragged some clothing from off a heather bed and partly covered himself, now proceeded to replace the damp blankets which were wound around that part of the worm* which the waterfall did not touch, and he addressed Donald in a low tone.

"Ye'll hae to get Shawm Mac Gilivray to take my place. I'm no going to carry on any more the year."

"Hout awa?" replied his future father-in-law in a tone of cross interrogation.

"No, I canna; I'm going back to Arduashien the morn."

"Ye're daft: the foreshott will be finished by next Sabbath!"

"I canna help it. Shawm will cask it as weel as me; but I want to ken what day after ye'll deliver yon keg at Dreumah that ye're going to sell them?"

"Aye, plenty siller, plenty siller to charge for it. It's Donald kens how to charge them!" chuckled old Ian Mohr.

"Nae work, nae share, Ewen," replied Donald Cameron sulkily. "I'm to gie Ralph the keeper a braw keg full this day week: 'it's he that ordered it, and he that'll pay for it.'"

"Aye, his master is no to ken where it came from," old Ian Mohr continued, laughing: "it's the rael mountain dew; he kens that, but neither he nor his man kens how near to them it is gathered. Oh, the brews that I hae seen, baith made and drank in this very place! No one ever could come in here wha was na a souple lad and a guid swimmer: I was that, nigh sixty years ago."

"It's for the chief o' the Dreumah herd the whisky's for, is it no?" Ewen again inquired; "an' he means to tak it to England wi' him."

"Sae I believe," Donald replied shortly.

* On the length of the worm, which must be always kept damp so as to condense the steam within it, depends the superiority of the spirit: if short, which is more economical, the spirit is weaker though strong.

"Well, ye had better tak care the gaugers don't get it first."

"Aye, indeed," said Ian Mohr, "they'll be swoopin' in this direction afore long, I'm sure; it's sae long since they were here: they never get anything to come for. See, Donald and I are ready, though: there's the little meal girdel will keep us in parritch and bannocks, there's our beds dry and warm, and there's the stuff that will comfort us, let us be kept in our prison ever so lang! They may prowl, breek and seek the hail country round, while we'll lie snug in here and do our braw work cheerily."

Not long after, Ewen said he could stay no longer; he must be off to Lochandhu by daylight. Donald muttered that if he chose to go out, and in that way, the risk of his society was more than it was worth; however, he helped Ewen liberally to the delicious, intoxicating breelish,* to keep the cold out, and then, after a long, and searching view of the horizon, looking out from the loop-hole in the bank, he helped to push him out, saw him plunge into the water, and swim safely up the Loch to where his clothes lay concealed on the bank. Ewen then started on with swift step for Lochandhu, where he met with welcome from his mother, and shortly afterwards told her, with angry, wounded feelings, of his late extraordinary interview with Jeanie. Florh hummed an air, as if to herself, for a few moments. Ewen again burst forth,

"An' what deevilry has come on the lass, mother? Tell me, could that sassenach keeper have glamour'd her? Ralph would belie me, an' his English tongue run glib, did he care to seek her company!" and here a pang of jealousy shot through the Highlander's heart.

"No, my son; the keeper has a wife and bairns o' his ain in England countrie. But Jeanie, poor lass, she has been spinning and weaving the plaids o' fine wool to hup the feet of the keeper's masters; she has got gold for that; I hope she wiinna take it for aught else. Leave her alone, my son; it is nae for a Mackenzie to fleech to a Cameron! Leave her; the snow time will be the trial time."

Ewen was silent; but the arrow was shot, and it remained in the wound: when suspicion was confirmed by proof, then it would be for the hand of revenge to draw it out.

It was about [redacted] after this, one lonely evening, when Huistan, having [redacted] from the hill, sat engrossed on the thyme-scented [redacted] cottage-door, nursing a wounded

strong ale stage.

lamb he had carried down in his arms, and when Ewen had gone back to Arduashien, that Florh, putting on her plaid and a clean white mutch, set off walking leisurely to Glenbenrough. She wished to arrive there after dinner, when she would be sure to find the three young ladies not far from home. The merle and the mavis were in full evening song, and the balmy-scented air came warm and fragrant with the perfume of birch, fir, and bog-myrtle, extracted by the sun during the previous hot day. Florh saw from the Roua Pass, ere she descended, Norah and Ishbel, with their father, sauntering midst Norah's flowers in the garden, while Esmé, whom she wanted, sat with a book on one of the hall-door steps. Esmé, seeing Florh in the distance, rose and went to meet her.

"Weel, my darling, and is the hoose empty noo? An' what day are ye all going to the Dual Ghu?" asked her foster-mother, as she approached.

"Some day soon, I hope, dear Florh; it has all to be arranged yet. Come and sit down at the door."

As they sat there, Esmé could not but observe the restlessness of Florh; who answered absently, and looked about her uneasily as if in dread of any interruption. There was evidently none of the heavenly repose of the evening about her, and her walk there had not been one for pleasure, but intended to be on business. Florh broke ground thus, just as Esmé was going to make the observation:

"Esmé, I hae come the night to speak on a sair subject. It's on Ewen, your ain foster-brother, whom ye must hae feeling for: my sleep has left me since last night, till I could get this word with you."

Here Florh sat down opposite Esmé; her lips became a bloodier red, and her smooth brow knit into a troubled frown as she spoke, angry determination kindling all over her fine strong face.

"It's o' Ewen I must tell you; and see, can you help me? He has been cursed ever since his servitude at Dreumale. Bread o' the Englishman there has brought him nought but bitterness: an unlucky star it was that guided him there (them either)," she muttered.

"But, Florh, that is an old story: Mr. Marchmoram told me all about it long ago. Nothing could have been more wrong than Ewen's conduct: he was not like any of the other gillies, who all behave subordinately and enjoy themselves in such a good place; but he was proud and foolish. Then it

was a quarrel amongst themselves: Mr. Marchmoram only ordered them to make peace. Ewen was very wrong."

"Esmé," Florh exclaimed, her eye fiercely glaring, "ye winna turn against your foster brother for the sake o' a stranger!" (Esmé's lip slightly curved with a smile.) "It's o' Mr. Marchmoram I would speak: it is he that has brought misery on my son. But I speak no of the Dreumah gillieship: let Ewen be wrong there if it's your will to think it; but listen to this. Ye ken Jeanie Cameron, that has been Ewen's lassie since they were children at the school together? Never did lass lo'e lad more dearly than Jeanie did my Ewen, and lang has he bided for his wedding-day. Weel, when he was at Dreumah, she went to see him different times; I sent her mysel' with claithes and wee things, to gie her an excuse to go. But, listen ye now; since Ewen left, Jeanie goes there still—she goes there still——"

"Well, Florh, what do you mean? Mr. Marchmoram told me that she goes there; she has spun plaids for the gentlemen. Ralph, the head keeper, recommended her spinning to them."

"Aye, but listen yet, Esmé; you have not heard it out. Ewen was some time o' going to see Jeanie after he left, and the first time he did, what think ye? She treated him wi' scornfu' pride; she cast the Dreumah gillieship in his teeth; she praised Mr. Marchmoram (though he once struck my Ewen, Florh muttered between her teeth), "and ever since she has withdrawn her company from him. At the kirk she does na' meet his eye, or mine; and trow she has need na to look up, for I hae found the proof o' her conduct: I was sure to find it; trust Florh Mackenzie no to do it! By my own ways I found it; but I hae kept it frae Ewen as yet. Mr. Harold is the best man 'mongst them o' Dreumah: I know he is the best gentleman; and ye ken 'like master like man.' I could na' get proof but from them in the Lodge; I would na speak to the servants o' Mr. Auber and Mr. Marchmoram (they would be sure to be gay lads, yon), but I made friends by slow degrees; and sure, with Mr. Harold's Gupini. Last night, sitting by my ain fireside, I made him toddy o' the strongest whisky ever smuggled in Glenbenrough, and then I got him out with the truth. Oh, Esmé, my son's undone! and where is happiness for him more? Jeanie Cameron has gien hersel' up to Mr. Marchmoram!"

"No, no, Florh," Esmé exclaimed vehemently, springing to her feet; "don't believe that: I will never believe it!"

"Aye, aye, that was what I feared, bairn; ye would na' believe it," Florh said with a groan; "but will ye believe it if I gie you the proof? It behoves you to take proof."

"Yod could not; I know it is false: don't speak of it to me, Florh!"

"But I must speak. It may be nothing to you if Ewen is made a ne'er do weel for his life, an' leaves his mother an' his country for aye: ye may nae care for his happiness an' mine; but there's another reason. Mr. Marchmoram is intimate, sae friendly here, and ye should know what he is." (Florh gave a withering sneer.) "Ye must na' refuse the proof; ye should know what he is! But this, tho' proved, will be no grand offence, I trow: there's few shooting-boxes in the country where the Englishmen may na take what sport they will."

"Florh, Gupini is from a country where lying and cunning are common in his class. Go to Jeanie herself, tax her with her shame, and a glance at her own face will tell you more truth than you will hear sworn to by the Italian. Don't give up your authority; merely tax her with your own accusation, and judge by her looks!"

"That's not the way I work, Esmé. I will bide my time yet a wee: if the mischief's done it canna be undone. Revenge would be sweet to me; but I would nae wish my son to take it, for he would na know where to stop. I will tell him nothing, unless I see my way clear. Gupini, though a foreigner, is a simple lad! he likes my Ewen, he might tell him——"

"Ah! Florh, beware! This is utterly false. Gupini may even have some dislike to Jeanie, and for this reason have said what he did."

"No, no; I have been long trying to find out from him. I have not heard it all yet, but I will give him toddy every night till I do: a man speaks truth when he is fou."

Ere Esmé could again reply, Ishbel came running up and told her that tea was ready; Esmé told Florh to remain, as she would walk part of the way to Lochandhu with her and finish the conversation. The sun was setting as they started, and the delightful freshness of the evening air cooled Esmé's brow; which, from the recent continuation of late hours, felt feverish. She took off her hat and courted the heather-scented breeze which played through her hair and on her brow. This communication of Florh's, from its suddenness and grave import, had given Esmé a shock; but it was merely a repellent one on hearing the name of Marchmoram so irreverently approached:

the desecration of Florh's account of her familiar converse with the Italian valet, touching him to whom already a lofty conception was attaching a sort of sanctity. How dared he fix on that high name for his falsehood! the word should have burnt his lips! Florh spoke of revenge, and Esmé felt that some pulse, vibrating to the promptings of that passion, beat in her heart now. She must have this Italian banished: could not Norah's influence prevail upon Harold to dismiss him from his service? Esmé did not believe in any guilt connected with Jeanie at all; but when, as they walked, Florh assured her that Ewen, one night lately on his way to Arduashien, had passed Dreumah Lodge and himself got a glimpse of Jeanie stealing behind the house, she the more strongly urged Florh to seek personal explanation from the girl. They had passed the Roua Pass a considerable distance before Esmé observed that, by that sympathy which so curiously influences action, she had wandered from the track to Lochandhu and was following one which led direct to Jeanie Cameron's cottage. Florh in her excitement and abstraction had also been unconscious of the diversion, but they both became aware of it at the same moment. Esmé now redoubled her arguments to induce Florh to seek an interview with Jeanie.

"No, no, Esmé, ma guil, 'tis no the time; I will bide a wee: the proofs are to be gi'en to me all sure, and then I will turn on her: then I will go, once and for all."

"Take care, Florh! Take care that you don't wreck your own son's happiness. I am sure the girl is wronged."

"Aye, wi' her own consent!" exclaimed Florh, with a hasty bitter laugh. "I believe in her guilt as sure as I do in the blackness o' yon rocks."

"You asked my advice," continued Esmé firmly; "it is that you should be honest and act straightforwardly: don't take underhand ways, in which you may meet one any day to outwit yourself. Gupini may have a stronger head than you suppose. Surely you would rather have proof of the girl's innocence than of her guilt! Go to her, and I believe you will be able, with your own quickness, to judge better from seeing herself. If it is only a passing quarrel with Ewen, you can then make it up and bring him back to her; but if you find she has entered into any flirtation with one of the other Dreumah gillies, or has chosen another lad amongst them (for I don't believe her guilty in any way), then break it to Ewen gently. For God's sake, Florh, don't stir up wicked thoughts

of revenge : Ewen's disposition at any time is not so good as Huistan's, and you would never forgive yourself if you led him into harm."

Esmé ceased. She would not have mentioned Mr. March-moram's name in any conjunction whatsoever with the story ; and Florh knew her too well to attempt further allusion to him at present, save by the insinuation of her manner.

"Weel, weel, Esmé, I will think : I hae it to think o'. I have lived longer than you, and have seen Jeanie's betters discovered to have been guilty, wi' less witness than has been gien me o' her. But I must turn home, and think how will I win Gupini to silence. My Ewen keeps his company, an' should he hear while his anger is hot, I would na save the highest in the land from his vengeance ;"—here Florh glanced at Esmé, who looked haughtily defiant ;—"but, indeed, if I keep it from Ewen now, I may do it ever : he has lo'ed Jeanie all his life, an' if he lose her, his anger will never cool. His love and his anger, and his thought for vengeance, would be the same five years hence !" and Florh stubbornly turned in the path, with her face towards Lochandhu.

"Well, go home ; and next time you come to Glenbenrough I hope it will be to tell me you have acted rightly, Florh. I am thirsty, I must take a drink," Esmé said, and she advanced to a little group of birch trees in front, where she knew of a spring, bubbling beneath their shadow. It was a wild, tangled little spot, with sunken rocks and trunks of trees covered with honeysuckle, ivy, and tall ferns. Florh stood beside her as she stooped to drink ; at the same moment a slight noise in the underwood made Esmé start round.

"Tis but a madobh-roua, or a gaur" (a fox or a hare), said Florh ; but Esmé's eye had caught sight of something more bulky : she sprang forward, as a swarthy face with a pair of gleaming black eyes looked up from the heather, and a voice exclaimed in broken English,

"Ah, signorina, è trovato ! the flask perduto—my master's flask, me has found : me seek it very long—many days."

It was Gupini, Harold's valet ; who, as he rose from the ground, held up a silver-topped drinking flask, which Esmé recognized as having seen in Harold's possession. Esmé shuddered as she drew herself to her full height, and glanced around ; on every side the solitude was unbroken : there was no living being within sight, save themselves. She only allowed herself to give a distant nod to the valet, ere she

turned away towards Glenbenrough, followed by Florh. They had scarcely disappeared, when Gupini raised the flask to his lips and quaffed a draught, calling out,

"Bella signorina! buona suocera mia, alla sua salute! Venite qua, mia carissima!" (Beautiful young lady! good mother-in-law; I drink to your health! Come here, my dearest.)

A rosy-cheeked face peeped out from behind an ivied rock, and the faithless Jeanie Cameron stood revealed. The Highland girl, with her chubby cheeks, replying in harsh, guttural Gaelic to euphonious Italian, and with the wondering look of ignorance holding a fragile pair of Genoese bracelets in her rough, sunburnt hand, was a striking picture. Gupini had entered Harold's service as courier when he had first gone abroad, and had proved a most valuable acquisition. He was a clever Italian, with instinctive quickness, untiring energy, and perfect temper; his faculties had been sharpened and improved by worldly experience: he evidently knew life thoroughly, and was an acute observer of character. A romantic feeling, the gift of his clime, had not been extinguished in him; and it had served him on more occasions than one. Gupini was too shrewd a calculator not to appreciate Harold's easy English service as a desirable occupation for a time; and while he faithfully attended on his master, he enjoyed himself otherwise most thoroughly. The first few weeks of Dreumah he found rather *triste*: it was too solitary, and to live without an intrigue seemed to Gupini great waste of talent; so when Jeanie Cameron fell in his way, he successfully attempted to practise on her simple nature all the baleful arts he was master of. Ewen was his *bête noir*; for Gupini knew that a Highland dirk was quite as ready as an Italian stiletto. While his interviews with Jeanie were becoming almost too piquant from the daily increasing dread of discovery, the way to gain her love was suddenly made easy to him by Florh; and a new source of excitement was thus opened to the crafty little Italian. He thoroughly enjoyed the cunning game he had now to play, and succeeded in deceiving and baffling Florh; though she might any day discover his plot, unless put upon a completely wrong scent. He was too good a servant to bring down maledictions on his master: therefore he quietly directed suspicion on Marchmoram; and so completely did he succeed, that the more Florh saw Gupini in Jeanie's company the better she would be pleased, thinking he was furthering her aim by winning Jeanie's confidence.

A strict code of morality is not generally observed amongst the lower classes in the Highlands; the Scotch temperament is undemonstrative, outwardly not ardent, but under cautious self-control, and a Calvinistic self-denial often influences even their loves; yet but too many instances of *faux pas* occur amongst the unmarried of the lower classes. There is a primitive leniency shown also; the fallen one being merely spoken of as having had a "misfortune" (the word raises a smile on the lip of those who know the exact sympathetic drawl with which it is uttered), and her disgrace seldom proves any obstacle to the formation of a future respectable marriage. But there is a line of difference drawn, by far greater forbearance being extended to those who offend only with their own class: the Scotch lads may forgive the sinful rivalry of each other, where a stranger's amour would be followed by hottest indignation.

Florh scarcely knew yet what course to take. Had Jeanie been betrayed by one of her own class, Florh would, out of love for her son, have induced him in time to forgive the erring one, and they might yet marry; but as it was, she felt she must have time to strengthen her mind ere she could teach herself to forgive Jeanie's guilt, and to arrange a reconciliation, by never allowing Ewen to know who was the betrayer. The Englishman would leave the country by-and-by, and in the meantime she must bind Gupini down to secrecy. She would in the winter make up her mind how to act.

CHAPTER XI.

PLOTS AND PERILS.

'Tis true ye are furnished fair, Birdie, 'tis true ye are furnished fair,
 Wi' a braw pair o' bonny wings,
 Wad waft ye where yon lav'roch sings
 High up in air.

But then the wire's sae strong, Birdie, but then the wire's sae strong
 An' I myself sae seemin' free,
 Nae wings hae I to waften me

Where fain I' gang.
 And say ye got your will, Birdie, your proudfu' wilfu' way,
 When lav'rochs hover, falcons fly,
 And snares and pitfalls aften lie

Where wishes stray.

WHEN Marchmoram left Glenbenrough for Dreumah, Elsmé, who was seated at the hall door when he left the house, asked

him, as he bade her adieu, when he would be back ; he did not seem to hear her, however, and made no reply, but, whistling to his dogs, turned away. By dinner-time, all the Miss Mac Neils, each in her own way, had realized how much Marchmoram was missed ; but Esmé could not have expressed what she felt : his absence left a blank in her mind. The new element of the stimulus of his presence was wanting, and a craving void alone remained. At night, when she went to look at the stars ere going to bed, her gaze fell on the Roua Pass ; whence it rose no higher. She fancied him climbing it that forenoon, and thought also of the moonlight walk of the night before. For the first few days after his arrival at Dreumah, Marchmoram's society had been no great acquisition to his friends there : he was absent, and evidently not i' the vein. He said he had letters to write, and consequently sat much within doors. Harold now had choice of the beats ; for Auber also laid aside his gun for a week, as the sprain in his knee still troubled him ; and he too sat by the fire and meditated, conversed, or read. He and Marchmoram were close friends ; they had known each other almost since infancy, had travelled through Europe together, aided and advised each other a hundred times, and each thought he thoroughly understood the other. Auber knew that Marchmoram's dominant passion was ambition, and that it was subdued only by his will, until the time for its actual exercise should come. Indeed, Auber could have whispered into Marchmoram's astonished ear one of the very highest of his aims and his means of attaining it ; adding his friend's motto, "He who is in earnest wins." Auber, however, was now deceived : there was a fierce struggle going on in Marchmoram's mind, but the new combatant that had sprung up was yet invisible to him.

Marchmoram was hesitating whether he should allow himself to fall in love with Esmé Mac Neil or not. Aye, in love ! Auber had no plan at present ; he was going on an expedition into his own peculiar regions of pleasure, and what he had to do must be done secretly, Marchmoram should see only a flirtation with Esmé, which would veil any deeper designs ; and he not being in Auber's confidence, this wily man of the world could take his pleasure and retain his friend while outwitting him. But Auber, being wholly deceived as to Marchmoram's state of feeling, through that first grand mistake fell into another.

Marchmoram was sure that Auber would follow Esmé any

would try to make her his prey, and that he would conceal it from him. But Marchmoram knew Esmé also; he had probed her character, and the result of his scrutiny was a conviction that she was safe; he would watch over her. The only danger was, he thought, that his own admiration might become too engrossing; might not he, the on-looker, find himself at last stepping down from his height, and taking the young creature to his bosom? Was there no danger of this? Yet, for him Esmé would not be a legitimate conquest: she was too great a contrast to that of the Queen of the Forest, whom he had intended to pursue. And would this exchange of beauty for strength satisfy in the end? No! he had never been vacillating in purpose, and he would not now alter his first choice, while his reason stood firm by him. The conversations between Marchmoram and Auber in the Lodge of Dreumah now became an intellectual game of chess: each talked exactly as suited the play; but Auber was unaware of Marchmoram being an interested player.

Nearly a week had elapsed after Marchmoram's return to Dreumah, when, after an interchange of notes with Glenbenrough, he proposed a plan which seemed already to have been decided on by himself. Glenbenrough was going with his daughters in a few days to the Dual Ghu, a distant boundary of his property; some of the Strathshielie party, who were to have accompanied him, were prevented, and he therefore had great pleasure in inviting the three sportsmen from Dreumah. The only available accommodation at the Dual Ghu was to be found in the shealing of the pastoral tenant there, and would be required for the ladies; but a small tent would be pitched for Glenbenrough and young Arduashien, and the Dreumah party must find their own accommodation. "This," Marchmoram said, now speaking to Auber and Harold, "might easily be done, as we have our shooting-tent at hand, and it can be sent up to the Dual Ghu." They agreed, and on Marchmoram saying he would walk to Glenbenrough next day to settle the preliminary arrangements, they said they would go too: accordingly they again arrived together at Glenbenrough.

After lunch, Marchmoram went with Glenbenrough to view some antique weapons in his study, while the young ladies proceeded with the other gentlemen to the garden, to visit a famous old apple-tree of the almost extinct Scotch species of "Jenny Sinclair." While Ishbel climbed into the branches and threw down the fruit, which Norah and Harold gathered,

Auber led Esmé to her favourite seat, a rock overhanging the river and shaded by wild cherry and old garden trees. Here they talked with the familiarity of intimate acquaintance. Esmé asked him to tell her some of the stories of operas, and Auber led Esmé in imagination through the scenes of "La Sonnambula," "Norma," "I Puritani." As he dwelt artfully, yet delicately, on the scenes of passion, a blush would rise on Esmé's cheek; when, his voice changing its tone, he would lead to a different scene. At last Glenbenrough and Marchmoram appeared in the distance, and as they arose and moved to join them, Auber said to Esmé,

"These little talks are very pleasant, Esmé; I hope we may have them oftener. I shall ride over here on the afternoon of the 23rd, and leave Dreumah earlier than the others; could you not go to Lochandhu that day for lilies? If you are there soon after three o'clock, I might escort you back to Glenbenrough."

Esmé hesitated a moment; Auber looked at her with a smile of surprise, and repeated his question. Not allowing herself time to analyze conflicting feelings, she answered, as they were almost within hearing of the others,

"Yes—perhaps."

On the morning of the 23rd of September Normal Mac Alastair left Arduashien for Glenbenrough; but ere he reached the latter place an adventure had befallen him. He rode the first fifteen miles, carrying his gun slung to the crupper of his saddle; then, dismounting at a lonely little wayside inn, which stood on the hill track parallel to that terminating at Dreumah, he pursued his way on foot; that exercise suiting his inclination best. In riding up to the inn, Normal had noticed a large travelling carriage, heavily laden with imperials, and drawn by four wearied horses, toiling slowly up the steep ascent before him; probably conveying some wealthy English visitors to their fashionable friends' shooting quarters. The host of the inn, who was filling his snuff-mull lazily at the door, replied in Gaelic to Normal's inquiry, that he knew nothing of their course or destination.

"Muckle fine sassenach servants!" he said. "They asked had we corn and stabling; and girmed and snickered when I showed them the byre, where our ain beasts lie. The wife though, she up and told them she wad na be fashed to turn out the kye for them. It's she that'll no be put upon by ignorant, prood, forrein folk!"

"Those horses will never pull on to Braemorin," Normal observed. In the meantime the carriage went on, toiling up a steep rugged track between high barrier hills, and swaying heavily with the weight of luggage and the inequality of the road; the horses stopped for breath when about a mile past the inn, and where the hills seemed to crush together in advance and sternly forbid all farther progress. The fortress required but to be stormed, however, for within a hundred yards there was a rent in the foremost rock; through this rugged natural archway the carriage noisily passed, and then the horses' feet pressed onwards down a grassy winding ravine, a luxurious contrast; the way winding amid high banks of natural waving grass and steep wooded hill sides, green with feathery birch and palmy fern, beneath rocky precipices bright with purple heather, and slanting down into a shadowy and sunlit gorge, soft and bright as a painter's dream: it was a scene not to be passed unheeded.

The carriage again stopped, and ere officious maid and valet could descend to assist, the door opened and a tall woman alighted; she waved her hand to the driver to proceed, and smiled and nodded to an elderly man who looked out after her as she quickly walked on. The lady was very tall, of a slight and straight figure, with pale, dark features, shadowed by a black broad-brimmed riding hat. She wore a plain, gray travelling dress, and her step had the firm elasticity and conscious ease of a high-bred woman, as she trod the smooth grassy track. It was a fine face, and the eyes looked with a clear and decided gaze on all the scenery around; but neither on the face nor on the eyes was there any kindling glow of pleasure: it was a cold, impassable face; too smooth and polished to be called worn, but without a trace of sensibility or freshness. As the lady walked on she appeared absent, and spoke audibly to herself; taking out a little note-book, she seemed absorbed over some written leaves, then she wrote in it with a pencil; but certainly that pencil traced no sketch or observation of the scene before her. At last the bracing, perfumed air seemed to recal her to the present; and ascending a wild rock, she looked around, apparently in search of the carriage. It was nowhere visible; so she clambered upwards to a precipitous path, which ran along the gorge at a great height from the track beneath: it was slippery, from its rich verdure being saturated by the trickling burns which flooded it *every here and there.*

The view before her extended far beyond, into wilder glens and along winding rivers—an unbroken solitude: and she started with surprise at the presence of two persons seated in the heather, almost in the path before her. There sat a young man and a Highland shepherd maid, their arms entwined around each other, and partly screened from her haughty view by wild honeysuckle and tangling brier: those two hearts were beating too closely together,—the words of love were too softly, rapidly whispered,—for the pair to perceive the stately contempt of that lady, who, drawing herself to her full height, seemed as if prepared to overawe them by her dignified presence. She advanced with averted look; yet, as if impelled by some fascination, cast a momentary glance at the lovers. Had an adder sprung up at her feet; had the rock beneath her opened a fiery gulph; the agony of her expression—her dumb, ghastly attempt to escape the sight before her—could not have been more horrifying. That cold, impassable face became white and spectral, the eyes fiercely glared like a tiger's at bay, the thin lips were drawn convulsively, the low, Greek brow was contracted, and her trembling fingers grasped the rock for support. Clinging to a rowan-tree that overhung the edge of the path, she sunk down upon her knees, and her head struck upon the ground: her brain was reeling. Presently she rose, and summoning strength, retraced her steps some paces; but the pair might move away and come upon her again: she must climb and get higher up—ascend the hills to avoid them. Quickly, and with excitement almost maddening, she climbed the almost precipitous rocks above; her delicate foot resting on the sharp-edged ledge, and her jewelled hands grasping the thorny whin, she dragged herself up, her dress hanging about her in torn strips, and blood starting at the knee. But this day's struggle was not over yet. On the heights above, a wide expanse of moor and wood, bounded by high rocky hills, lay spread around, and at the distance of about half a mile, the termination of the long deep gorge below seemed gained. A beaten road then appeared, emerging from a thicket of pine and fir; and there the travelling carriage was drawn up, evidently awaiting her approach. The lady took off her hat, and sinking down on a moss-covered stone, sat there immovable, her face buried between her hands; long, deep drawn inspirations marking the reaction of excitement and fatigue. When she looked up, her eyes were bloodshot and a tear quivered in each; she wiped them proudly, and a hard, determined look succeeded: the cold,

polished calm came gradually back, as she sat there in the mountain breeze, and an expression of disdainful power showed whence it came. "I am strong," was written in every lineament of that haughty, but impassive, face. The lady arose at last and walked on, apparently restored to her previous dignified calmness; but she was not likely to forget this Highland walk.

As she advanced, the sound of an axe striking amongst the trees attracted her; and, thinking it might be a wood-cutter who would direct her to an easier path, the lady turned into the wood towards it. A loud discordant voice, singing a Gaelic psalm, to the time of the strokes, led her on, and in a few moments she had confronted the singer: it was Angus of the Hammer; he was half naked, as usual, having only a tattered plaid tied by a rope round his waist, and he was beating and bruising the trees with his ponderous hammer. Insanity burnt in his light glazed eye; and his long matted hair hung like a yellow mane on his shoulders. Without stopping to scrutinize the man, whom she took for one of the savage peasantry, she asked, in an imperious tone, "Can you direct me to the road beneath?" Angus N'Ort appeared neither to see nor to hear her; he went on striking the trees and muttering in Gaelic and English: "Hew them an' hack them: the Philistines are against thee! Cleave them, and brain them! Scatter the ungodly to the winds!" The lady understood not a word of his idiom, so she repeated her query a little louder, and advanced a step nearer, with an expression of disgust on her face. Angus ceased for a moment, and stared wonderingly on this apparition; a blank look came over his otherwise not unvacant visage, and, as if understanding that it was some kind of request she addressed to him, he fumbled with his hand into a woollen bag he wore tied round his brawny neck, and drew out a tin snuff-box which he proffered, saying gruffly, "Sneezhin?" The lady, who did not know that to offer a pinch of snuff is the most ordinary mode of salutation in the Highlands, frowned, and with a scornful gesture repulsed the proffered civility. "Do you understand me?" she said; "I desire to know which path to take, so as to get easiest down. Show me, and I will pay you." That look and bearing struck dangerously on the madman's fancy: perhaps the recent excitement had given the lady's eye an unnatural light of imperiousness; and then her dress was unusual. He bent forward as if to listen, and whispered hoarsely,

"Were ye sent here? Are ye an angel o' mammon's; if so, I'm against ye!" and he put out his finger to touch her.

"Don't touch me!" she exclaimed, drawing back with loathing. "He must be mad," she muttered, as she turned away to regain the path. But it was too late. Angus N'Ort sprang after her: his mad fury was excited, and tossing his head like a bull waxing wroth, and foaming at the mouth, he strode by her, muttering inarticulate words: his rage, and her danger, increasing every moment.

"Touch ye not! Touch ye not! Then ye're one o' the Deamhan's dark ones! I must hae conflict wi' ye—here, out on the lone hill top! 'Consume them in wrath,' it is said! I'll consume *thee*: I'll send thee down to the place o' dragons!"

He seized her arm and tried to drag her along. They were on the very edge of the slippery precipice, and with sudden ireful energy she unloosed his grasp and thrust him back; then, trembling as much from insulted pride as fear, she stamped her foot and bade him begone. The flame of madness was kindled: he sprang on the high-born woman with a yell, shouting, "Down, down to the pit o' perdition! Pride takes its fa'. Down to death and torment!" Then, bending her slight figure in his grasp like a reed, he prepared to hurl her over the precipice. The appalling danger of death at the hands of a Highland madman was, however, averted by an unforeseen interposition: at that critical moment, a strong and well-directed blow, struck by a vigorous arm, felled the madman like a bull; and as Angus N'Ort rolled over, the lady sprang up unhurt from the ground.

Young Normal Mac Alastair it was who thus timely interposed. Setting his foot on the prostrate assailant, with the leathern belt of his gun he endeavoured to tie the madman's hands. A struggle ensued, which, in its ferocity and strength, fascinated the eye of the lady; who leant, pale as a statue, against a tree. Brute rage and frantic force strove against masculine courage and high-tempered strength. The athletic figure of young Normal striving with the yelling naked madman, who, conquered, lay beneath his feet, might have served for a model to the sculptor. Angus gnashed his teeth in helpless rage, and snapped at Normal's knee as it pressed on his brawny chest, while his hands were being bound together; and when Normal finally threw a handkerchief over the madman's eyes as he rose, the yells of Angus were fearful, and his execrations terrible in their import.

"Oh, the darkness devoureth! the darkness devoureth!" he shrieked. "Let me no lie in the blackness o' darkness for ever! They'll be on me now, and howk out my soul wi' talons o' iron. Let me go! Let me go! Their jaws will gape, and they'll roar wi' tongues o' fire an' flame!"

"Hush, Angus, or the devil will hear you and come," Normal said. "Lie there, and I will soon send good people here. We must make haste and be gone," he added quickly, as he picked up his gun and plaid and approached the terrified lady, "Where may I escort you?" She pointed to the carriage beneath, and Normal almost bore her along, as, trampling upon whin and heather, he brought her safely down the long rocky descent to the gorge, when he set her down on the grass, and taking out a quach filled it at a spring and brought it to her. He replied with natural grace and ease, as she thanked him, in a few and earnest words, for saving her life.

"May I not know the name of him whom I should never forget?" she asked.

"Oh, I am one of a large clan," Normal replied, with a laugh; "with a name not very pronounceable! I trust you will never think of this fright again."

As they drew nearer to the carriage, she held out her hand and bade him good-by. "My father," she said, "had best not know of this adventure: it would needlessly alarm and pain him: but my gratitude to you is not the less deep and lasting. I never will forget that you have saved my life. We may yet meet in England."

He bowed low and gracefully, with eagle-plumed bonnet in hand; as she advanced and looked back. Nor did the lady ever forget that handsome young Celt, with his cool courage and native strength, and a look of dignity, derived partly from mental gifts, in his clear boldly speaking face. She had feared to mention her name to him; for she was still too near to that accursed spot on the path, that had sent her climbing up to meet this later danger: thus, despite her gratitude and an admiring interest in him, the woman whose life he had saved, hoped never to see Normal Mac Alastair again.

About the hour when Normal was struggling with Angus N'Ort, Esmé was pacing up and down a walk in the garden at Glenbenrough, hesitating as to her proposed ride to Lochandhu. It was not to gather water-lilies, but to meet Mr. Auber, that she was to go. In her innocence and ignorance of the strict rules of young-lady decorum, Esmé would have ridden solitary

through the darkest hours of night with Auber, and have felt no dread of harm ; but then she would have gone openly with a direct purpose. She now felt an unaccountable objection : she could on no account have mentioned to Norah this little scheme of a ride : she wished to go ; but an inward whisper counselled prudence. Yet what could there be wrong in it ?—Nothing. Then she would start at once. She walked boldly to the garden door ; but faltered, and turned back. She felt it was very childish : how easily he had asked her ; and what a fuss to make about such a little arrangement ! (the word *assignation* never entered her head). She left the garden and called to her pony, which was grazing on the river bank ; but Suila behaved with strange caprice, and capered out of reach each time Esmé approached. At last an apple tempted Suila, whom she caught by her mane, and led to the hall door, where saddle and bridle lay ready. The bridle was on and Esmé had turned to lift the saddle, when, with a bound, the ungrateful Suila darted off, galloping away ; and with head thrown back and snorting passionately, disappeared, going at full speed round the base of the Roua Pass. The saddle dropped from Esmé's hand. Never, in her remembrance, had the pony behaved like this before ; and a slight feeling of superstition was aroused by its conduct.

"Suila, you were right !" Esmé exclaimed ; and she slowly walked away, taking the path up the Roua Pass. She sat down on the height, and, gazing on the view beneath, meditated.

Esmé might have sat half-an-hour thus, and the autumnal shade of the afternoon was beginning to fall on the scene below, when a shrill whistle startled her. Turning her head, she saw Mr. Marchmoram wading through the heather with his dogs ; he soon came up to her, and then sat down on the rock, his dogs lying at their feet. He told Esmé that he and Harold had walked from Dreumah, but the latter had parted company and was finding his way to the house by the bridge. Auber intended to ride, but had not left Dreumah by the time they did.

"And what were you thinking about, sitting here, Esmé ? Were your thoughts sublime as the scenery ?"

"In one way they were ; but in another way they were lowly, for they were earthly, Mr. Marchmoram. They were of the high things of the earth."

"Are you ambitious, Esmé ?"

"Well, in respect of the earth, I think sometimes I am. I was just thinking, sitting here, that I would like to be a countess. If I were to marry a rich English earl I think I could

make him happier, and be much happier myself, than if I had been born a countess."

"Tell me how: I must hear this."

"In my experience of the life I have hitherto led, I have tasted all its healthy pleasures, and the enjoyments of rustic competence; but I feel as if I could enter into all the luxuries and pleasures of higher rank quite as naturally."

"But how would your pride, Esmé, like the idea of an earl thinking he honoured you in marriage?"

"But that is exactly what he would not feel; and what I would not," she replied quickly. "I have no faith in the romantic union of high and lowly, which means that of the educated with one uneducated: *mésalliances* never succeed. But were I to marry the earl, I would feel on as perfect equality with him as his sister might; for I am a lady by birth, and have been educated, have lived a natural and healthy life, and, I hope, am not vulgar."

"How, then, draw the distinction?" Marchmoram said; "why should you be happier than a born countess, who may be vigorous and healthy, and have led a natural life?"

"Simply from comparison," Esmé replied, looking abstractedly as she spoke: "a countess born (or one who may have been a Duke's daughter ere her marriage to the earl) has been accustomed from her birth to all the grandeur and luxury around her. A new set of costly jewels would excite no more pleasurable sense of novelty in her than the change of one colour of linsey woolsey for another would now excite in me: she can have no more zest for the brilliant scenes of ball-rooms than I have in the routine of our evening occupations. In all perfect refinement of manner there is some insipidity: however rarified the luxurious atmosphere of aristocratic life may appear, yet it must be inwardly stifling."

"And could you, think you, Esmé, step into this higher sphere and act your part well?" Marchmoram pursued, watching her face with interest.

"I don't think that would be very difficult," she replied. "Many and many a young commoner, like me, raised to high rank, might act this part very well; but were I to become suddenly a countess, my aim would be to combine both: I would be Countess Esmé with the heart of Esmé Mac Neil; I could be lady-like without being cold; I would love my husband as a man, not as an earl. If from courtly scenes we came to the Highlands, he could enjoy his shooting without fear

of the solitude wearying me: I would climb the rocks in my tartan skirt, to meet him returning from his vigorous sport on the hills; and, when we returned to England again, I could be there all he wished."

"Well, then," Marchmoram said, "would your aim be simply happiness for yourself and your titled husband, Esmé? Would you not desire from the countess to become duchess?"

"No," Esmé replied gravely: "that might be too great a responsibility; but having a strong natural ambition of rank, I have always felt that in the satisfied consciousness of it, I could enjoy life with all the vigorous training of my early youth."

"I understand you: a strange idea to enter the heart of a little Highland girl," said Marchmoram, after a pause, during which he had been deliberating whether to say more.

"Shall I sing you my favourite song now, Mr. Marchmoram?" asked Esmé, turning to him with an arch smile. "It is an antidote to that dangerous day-dream." (What would Norah have said could she have overheard it!) He expressed a wish to hear it, and in a low, sweet voice she sang:

"Oh, gin I were a Baron's heir,
And could I braid wi' gems ye're hair,
And mak' ye braw as ye are fair,
Lassie, would ye lo'e me?"

"And could I tak' ye to the toun,
And show ye braw sights many an anc,
And busk ye fine in silken gown,
Lassie, would ye lo'e me?"

"Or should you be content to prove
In lowly life unfading love,
A heart that nought on earth could move,
Lassie, would ye lo'e me?"

"And ere the lavrock lilt the sky,
Say, wad ye to the forest hie,
And wark wi' me sae merrily,
Lassie, for I lo'ed ye?"

"An' when the braw moon glistens o'er
Our wee bit bield an' heathery muir,
Will ye nae greet, for ye're sae puir,
Lassie, though I lo'ed ye?"

"For I hae nought to offer ye;
Nae gowd frae mine, nae pearl frae sca,
Nor am I come o' high degree,
Lassie, but I lo'e ye."

"Why, this is but the plaint of a lover to an ambitious mistress, Esmé!" Marchmoram exclaimed. "Your song only came as a supplement to the ambition of the countess; and the latter being first is first: 'tis your natural temperament, which is always stronger than education. You can't resist—you can't resist."

"I feel that: but I hate it: it keeps me from heaven," she replied fervently. Then, turning round, she fixed her blue eyes, beaming with excitement, on his face. He met her gaze with a steadfast look, and as they continued speaking, his dark eyes blazed with unwonted fire. Had Esmé been less absorbed she might not have mingled look with look so fearlessly; but the time for knowledge was not yet quite come.

"Oh, Mr. Marchmoram!" she exclaimed, "this fancy of the countess is but one phase of the restlessness ever stirring within me: but oftenest beneath the snow-bound horizon of Highland winters. In summer and autumn I can take my flight, materially, and quench my mental thirst of ambition in physical fatigue: when the fit comes on, I dispel it by a gallop over the hills."

"There is no strength without concentration, Esmé; if you foster your ambition thus till the right time comes, it will carry all before it."

A large party, consisting of Norah and Ishbel, with Mr. Auber, Harold, and Normal Mac Alastair, issued from the garden gate as Esmé and Marchmoram approached the hall door. They had sat a long time on the Roua Pass, for it now was not far from the dinner hour. In the greetings that followed, Esmé looked a little conscious as she met Mr. Auber's smile of half reproach, and he slightly pressed her hand. And as they all paused for Glenbentrough, hastening from the direction of the square, he had time to whisper,

"I have not been so ill treated since I left London; Esmé, why did you break your engagement to meet me to-day?"

"I did not say I would come, Mr. Auber."

"But you intended it." And he gave one of his looks of slightly implied satire, which made Esmé look up decisively and say quickly,

"Yes; I would have come, but Suila would not let me. And I am very glad."

CHAPTER XII.

BEN PHEE INN—THE DUAL GHU.

“ — He stood a little forebye,
For there he heard a fou fause knight
Tempting his gay ladye.”

“ Come down, come down, my bonny bird,
An’ sit upon my hand,
An’ thou shall hae a cage o’ gowd
Where thou hast but the wand.
Oh! there’s a bird within this bour
That sings baith sad an’ sweet;
I’ll tak’ the bird within this bour,
For it keeps me frae my night’s sleep.”

It was arranged that the whole party should drive over to breakfast at Phee next morning, the ponies being in waiting to carry them on to the Dual Ghu, as the journey was too fatiguing to be performed on horseback all the way. Glenbenrough had that day sent a messenger to Miss Christy Macpherson, announcing the intended inroad on her hospitality; and Ishbel was telling the Dreumah gentlemen that they ought to reserve their appetites during dinner, for Mr. Macpherson and his niece would make many appeals to them next morning, when a violent noise at the hall door interrupted conversation. “Parlons d’un loup!” Harold exclaimed to Norah, as the dining-room door was thrown open and in-rushed Miss Christy, her old straw bonnet crushed over her face and her best tartan gown a good deal crumpled. She flew to Glenbenrough, who rose with his usual kindly words of welcome, and that high-bred form of politeness which is ever ready for all within its reach. Sinking into the seat which he placed beside his own, and without greeting any one, Miss Christy burst forth,

“Colonel Sternbotham! Hech, hech—he’s nearly finished me!”

Every one looked surprised, and the Englishmen with difficulty repressed smiles. Miss Christy soon gained breath to proceed, and informed Glenbenrough that the colonel was in the drawing-room, and that they had performed the latter part of the journey from Strathshielie in one of her own vehicles—a cart from Phee—which was also to be in waiting next morning.

to take her and the colonel on to the inn of Ben Phee, whence he could easily make his way to the point of meeting with the mail.

"Ye see, I promised Lady Mac Neil to keep a had, o' him, till I got him safely to Ben Phee Inn; and I'm near worn out wi' him already. He's a real helpless bodach o' a man, and sae pernacity, he wad na let me put a finger on him; though he was like to tumble out o' the cart. I dared na offer to take hold o' him; an' I was near telling him he was as doited wi' modesty as the Rev. Mr. Mac Gil," said Miss Christy, turning to Auber, who was her nearest neighbour.

"Who was Mr. Mac Gil, Miss Macpherson? A man of guileless heart, I suppose."

"He was an evil-minded old gowk, Mr. Auber, begging his pardon; for when he was upwards o' eighty, he went to pay a visit to my aunt Maggie, who was over seventy-five years old. She, puir body, was delighted to see her old acquaintance.

"Come ben, come ben, Mr. Mac Gil," says she; 'Oh, but I'm glad to see ye. Shut to the door, shut ye close the door, and sit in to the fire wi' me here, till we hae a crack.'

"Nae, mem," says he, 'I'll no do that,' and he opened the door as wide as the hinges would let it; 'I'll no shut the door: ye ken the world's unco' censorious.'

"Did you ever hear the like o' that, Mr. Auber, an' he eighty, an' she seventy-five?"

Great was Miss Christy's disappointment on hearing of the plan that had been formed for breakfasting at the Inn of Ben Phee next morning, as it deprived her of the opportunity of dispensing the hospitality of Phee, and sore was the conflict 'twixt duty and inclination; however, she determined unflinchingly to abide by the former: she had promised Lady Mac Neil to escort the colonel, and it must be done: her Highland honour was pledged. It was now arranged that the Glenbenrough party should also breakfast at the inn, which took them but a mile or so out of their route, as it lay not far from the house of Phee; and the ponies should be sent on there. Glenbenrough left the room the moment he was aware of the arrival of Colonel Sternbotham, whom he found seated in the drawing-room in a sadly fatigued state.

By eight o'clock next morning the house rang with sounds of departure, and various vehicles stood drawn up at the hall door, the Phee cart ignominiously bringing up the rear: it was half filled with straw, and a tartan plaid thrown over it. In

this Colonel Sternbotham thought politeness made it imperative on him to travel, it being the conveyance expressly sent for his convenience from the farm-yard at Phee; and Glenbenrough, finding all contrary argument unavailing, resigned him to his fate. Miss Christy, who stood waiting with a huge plaid ready to fall upon him and hoist him in, set to work to bind him down, "weel happed," as she said, but in a way that literally deprived him of the use of hands and feet; and she succeeded, despite all his endeavours at independent action. Florh Mackenzie was there to accompany the young ladies; and in the confusion of starting, she whispered to Esmé,

"Will nae my bairn sit by her old nurse for an hour?"

"Certainly, dear Florh," Esmé exclaimed with alacrity; and she and Florh, in the dog-cart driven by Normal, took the lead in the cavalcade. Norah, with her usual right feeling, approached the Phee cart, as she felt bound to share the colonel's company so far; but just as she prepared to get in, he exclaimed in an appalled tone,

"Miss Mac Neil, I, as an old soldier, may bear strange modes of conveyance, but I cannot see you, a young lady, enter so barbarous a vehicle: it is quite unsuitable!"

"Unsuitable? An' what could come unsuitable to a daughter o' the house o' Glenbenrough?" cried Miss Christy in a shrill key, almost into the ear of the colonel, beside whom she was perched. "Miss Mac Neil no go in a cart! Set up them that says it, indeed! Miss Mac Neil might drive through London toun in a cart, and who would daur to think it unsuitable? Get ye up, Miss Norah; what does *he* ken?"

The early keenness of the morning air tempered the warmth of the sun, which shone out brilliantly as the cavalcade moved on. The road led winding along the base of the hills at the back of the house, and through woods of birch and pine; the sunshine bringing out the varied hues of the foliage,—the bright red wild cherry-leaf, the fading green of the birch, and the many-tinted herbage of heather, grass, and fern; the warmth also drawing out the perfume of the larch and pine. About an hour's drive brought the party down on the inn, so called; a wretched thatched house of one story, but standing on a site of exquisite natural beauty, suited for a castle. A herd of ponies were feeding on the grass before the door, and as many men lounged or stood near them, while the ground was strewn with baggage sufficient for a regiment, part of it contributed from the stores of Dreumah; Mr. Marchmont

having ordered additional hampers of wine and luxurious edibles, which made the Highland fare of Glenbenrough seem meagre. The landlady of the inn of Ben Phee came forward to receive her guests with unbounded pride and pleasure; the glow of a huge turf fire within being reflected on her ruddy, sun-burnt face. The breakfast was already being laid out in style in the best bed-room of the house, there being no sitting-room in the inn of Ben Phee: the kitchen would have been the only alternative, and it was already fully occupied. However, the bedroom, with its sanded floor, painted kists (chests of drawers), and clean spread table, was welcomed to the whole party, whose genial humour and good appetites made them unfastidious. Colonel Sternbotham, who was in high spirits at the approaching dissolution of his connection with Miss Christy, entered the room last, feeling almost reconciled to a barbaric breakfast as a closing scene in the Highlands; but just as he was taking his seat, his eye caught sight of the blue-checked curtains that screened two modest sleeping-places in the wall; and he turned and fled precipitately.

"Vouvé! he's taken the jaundice!" shrieked Miss Christy. "Did ever any one see such a disjaskit expression? Will ye no go an' see what ails him, laird? What will Lady Mac Neil say to me?"

Glenbenrough followed the retreating guest, and an almost fiery altercation ensued: even his polite forbearance to a stranger could endure no longer, and his quick temper rose at the absurd squeamishness of the English colonel, who was obstinate.

An amusing scene now presented itself: the whole party in the bedroom sat down to a smoking repast, waited on with assiduous attention by the landlady, and the Dreumah valets; while the colonel sat in solitary state in the Phee cart drawn up in front of the house, having a wooden stool for a table, upon which relays of breakfast were served forth to him from the merry board within. He sat there sipping his tea as if it were vinegar, his lurid complexion quite apoplectic in the morning sun. But he was not allowed even the consolation of peace in his solitude; for Miss Christy made constant rushes from her seat to the open window of the bedroom, when she poured forth vehement appeals and addresses to him.

"Come in, come in! What scunner have ye to the decent bed, man? Mony's the time I hae slept in it! It's a' lined wi' the 'Inverness Courier;' and mony's the morn I

wakened, and read wi' pride before my eyes o' the Phee butter carrying the first prize at Martinmass Market. What evil is in the body's head no to tak his meat in here ! "

Then she would return to her seat, and resume breakfast, eating vigorously as she spoke.

"Ye suld tell him, Glenbenrough, o' the old house o' Kingoll, in your father's lifetime, where the laird's bed was in the dining-room wa'. Mony's the time ye hae seen it; an' when the laird an' his compeers were over their toddy belate, Lady Kingoll would just gae behind the press door, and put on her night gear, an' get into her bed afore them a'; an' wha thought the wofse o' her, yon times? Wad he compare the bluid in his veins to the old bluid o' the Kingolls? I trow it's not likely."

The colonel at last turned his back to the open window, and to all Miss Christy's appeals preserved a strict silence. This aggravated her more and more, and Normal Mac Alastair, skilfully stirring the fires of her wrath, she at last became, to use her own words, "Neither to hold, nor to bind," and she prepared to sally out upon him; and it was only by Norah and Esmé's joint entreaties that she was restrained.

"Had! had! Miss Esmé, till I be at him! It'll no do to put up wi' it. He's bringing a scandal on all of us here!"

"Nonsense, Miss Christy, he only punishes himself, so pray be quiet."

"Well, gie me your hand, Esmé," she exclaimed with excited expression; "promise me ye'll be upsides wi' him: noo; promise me an' I'll leave him quiet."

"I will try," Esmé said; and, breakfast now being over, she went out to the colonel, and whispered, *sotto voce*, "We think you should make haste; for if you don't start soon, you will lose the mail, and Miss Christy would then insist on accompanying you back to Strathshielie, or on remaining with you here until to-morrow."

The effect was magical. The colonel's complexion turned a pale green colour, and, clambering out of the cart, he ordered a dog-cart to be got ready instantly, to take him on to the stage where the mail was expected. He seemed altogether in such a wretched state of trepidation, that Miss Christy (who was watching from the window) felt her triumph of vindictiveness complete. She saw that he had been made most uncomfortable; and, though ignorant of the means used, was fully satisfied. She cried aloud to the company,

"Aye, aye, I see she has been upsides wi' him noo ! It was gash o' me to gie her the preferment : it's she that has made him !"

There were no witnesses to the final parting between Miss Christy and Colonel Sternbotham, for the ponies were now all saddled and ready and the whole party mounted and bade them farewell, leaving the couple motionless on the threshold ; the colonel with bending form, as if intently listening for the rescuing wheels of his coming vehicle, and Miss Christy grimly erect beside him—a statue of vigilance guarding despair.

Glenbenrough rode in advance, and the others followed *en masse*, down a steep bank to the edge of the river Dual, which flowed broadly here. It was a stream taking its rise among the distant mountains to which they were bound, and swelled, in its distant course, to much greater breadth and importance than the river Rouagh of Glenbenrough ; it bounded and intersected the property of that family for many and many a mile, and the flow of it had been music to the ears of the Mac Neils for many ages back. A track led along the brink, which soon became very precipitous, and the party were obliged to go in single file. The three girls rode their own ponies. Florh was mounted on a strong Galloway, and the gentlemen were all mounted ; a band of gillies brought up the rear on foot, driving before them animals laden with baggage. It required a steady head to look down, as the ponies clambered along the very edge of a precipice overhanging the river, which roared and foamed in turbulent haste over its dark rocky bed. The Englishmen of Dreumah could not but admire the easy grace of the Highland girls, as they rode with reins loose on their ponies' necks, and with eyes raised in silent admiration of the scenery around them, without a tinge of fear to mar their enjoyment, and with no foolish or affected nervousness to call for exacting attentions. As they ascended, the character of the hills changed ; and with the increased altitude, the trees began to disappear : a group of birch scattered here and there, or a few old pines crazy with age, became prominent amongst the rocks ; and the eye wandered on to distant ranges of hills, whose savage grandeur eclipsed all nearer or tamer objects : the foremost ran parallel with the opposite bank of the river, rising in colossal tiers, the bold, dark outlines of their summits standing in strong relief against the bright September sky ; while the more distant hills reared themselves in painted lights of faintest blue, violet, and gray, until the colours paled away undistinguishable amidst the crowning clouds.

The cavalcade did not proceed in stillness ; conversation was general, each looking back upon his neighbour and transmitting message or inquiry along the line to the further riders. Auber had not approached Esmé, nor conversed with her since the evening before, nor did she even meet his eye ; she consequently felt a little inward restlessness : she missed the sound of his low, thrilling voice, and wished for one of his beautiful smiles, undefinable in expression, half tender, half admiring. Anything but indifference : that would gall her. Esmé had never before in her life so fully appreciated the charm of intellectual sympathy ; in the society, now familiar to her, of Auber and Marchmoram, the powers of her mind were roused ; her imagination had free scope, and she gave expression to her wildest flights of fancy, receiving either sympathy or strength in return. In the conversations which she had held with Auber, what was it that deterred Esmé from staking her all ? She was saved from falling deeply in love by a pervading feeling that Auber was not true. While he spoke, she was absorbed in the momentary pleasure she derived from the subtle harmony of his thoughts and language ; but when he ceased, and she looked up, she would find, perhaps, his head thrown back and a half smile of complacency on his face, as if he were pleased at playing his part so well. This struck her with a chill feeling of misgiving. Had he been saying what he did not feel ? Her mind had been gratified, but her heart had not been satisfied. Then, ever and anon, he would utter some cold, worldly maxim, which would darken the brightness of his high-flown sentiment.

It will have been seen that some of the more refined elements of the coquette belonged to Esmé's individuality. She liked the secret power over Normal's allegiance, which she felt lingered within her grasp : it had belonged to her from childish years, and the very reserve with which his pride guarded it from her view, made her seek to get occasional glimpses of it. Then her foster-mother Florh, who held powerful influence over them both, and who depended upon it for realizing the greatest ends her lowly ambition could reach to, never ceased to try, by rousing Esmé's passionate love for the Highlands, to make her connect Normal with it as personifying Highland nobleness in character and position. Normal, however, had been but the forerunner of Auber, and held but divided sway. Was not Auber, who had tried to awaken her feelings, destined to accomplish it ? A single element wanting in him prevented

this ; and it might not have been missed, but that she saw it embodied in a third man—one whom she *might* have been born for. Auber would not have supported her in that fearful day on Corrieandhu ; she would have shrunk from help from him : his spirit was a cold clear flame, beautiful to her gaze ; but she had never approached it for warmth : early selfishness or betrayal had burnt out the fire of his heart. She felt she must not turn to him in weakness ; for then he might turn away from her : her beauty must be bright, her spirit unfailing, when she sought communion with him. Normal, with his strong arm, would have borne her through the storm ; though he was so familiar with wreathing mists and weather battles, that he could not have felt the sympathy which her fainting strength required : he would perhaps have smiled, and rallied Esmé, as he carried her on ; for he had often seen her brave as rough a storm before. But Marchmoram ! to him she had flown as a dove to the shelter of a leafy oak : with him was all that was wanted elsewhere. That form of inflexible strength and that Spartan face, lighted by eyes that might gleam in softest tenderness on her, or turn in consuming rage on him who dared to molest ! Marchmoram—with his iron will, and high ambition—when with him, she felt the wondrous support of his character ; which would have strengthened the nobler and the better part of hers : his materialism would have been compensated by her spiritualism. But Marchmoram's evil genius averted his regard from the soul-love that burnt clear and pure in Esmé's heart—a beacon that might warn him from the rocks and shoals amongst which ambition was driving that noble vessel.

The track which the riding-party had pursued brought them down to the level of the river, where a wide expanse of dark moss diversified by pools of bog-coloured water, stretched on, far as eye could reach, to the foot of a barrier of gray rocky hills. A sort of causeway of huge slabs of rock and flat stones had been laid along the surface of the moss at intervals, indicating the route up to the base of these hills ; it was curious to note the sagacity of the ponies, putting their fore feet closely together, and springing like goats from stone to stone : a single slip would have sent horse and rider floundering into the bog. At last the base of the barrier hills was reached, and, not without an effort, the animals scrambled on to it ; when, encouraged by shrill Gaelic cries and whoops from the *gillies*, they clambered up the steep and rugged ascent, *taking at a bound the rocks in their way.* A sort of rugged ravine, &c.

clift was gained at the top, and through this the ponies passed one by one; assembling on the other side upon a broad ledge of heathery grass, they found themselves in view of the Dual Ghu: hills upon hills rose towering over each other, forming a majestic amphitheatre, at once grandly crowning and closing in the scene. A flight of steps, cut into the almost perpendicular side of the rock, led down to the river, which ran broadly beneath, and was crossed by stepping-stones; then a long sweep of natural grass brought them up to the shealing—a low range of turfed hutting, from which blue clouds of smoke were issuing. There the tents were pitched; cows and goats were grazing around them, and a band of kilted men and rough-coated colly-dogs were dispersed over the ground.

The shealing of Dual Ghu consisted of several small rooms, separated from a large one used as a kitchen, and divided from each other merely by a wainscoting of twisted birch twigs; the windows never had known glass, and a wooden shutter excluded light and air at night. The air being the favourite element of the Miss Mac Neils, they did not use the shutter; and, ere falling asleep at night, they could return the clear calm gaze of the moon, as she poured her silver radiance upon the gray mountain summits; while the turf smoke, which strongly impregnated their room, found egress at the open window. This shealing was the abode of the shepherds and milkmaids of the flocks and herds of Mr. Macrae, the patriarchal tenant; and they were now all housed within it: the two rooms occupied by the girls and nurse Florh being always held exempt, and ready for the use of the laird himself when he came each autumn to shoot. The tent which Glenbenrough and Normal occupied had a small sleeping place partitioned off, and the centre now served for the general dining hall, wherein the daily breakfasts and dinners were served up in *fête-champêtre* style. A great part of the cooking took place at a huge fire-place in the open air, where the smoke being less condensed than in the low-raftered reeking kitchen of the shealing, the viands were served up without a peaty flavour.

Next morning, soon after sunrise, and while the gentlemen were still enfolded in their tents, Florh aroused her young ladies, who sallied forth with her to the banks of the river which ran at the back of the shealing. Circles of stones built in the water, which here ran deep and silent, marked rural *baths*, formed years before under the direction of Norah, and in they plunged from the high and shelving bank, each into

her own clear pool; their complexions, as they ran back in the bracing sunny air to complete their toilettes, testifying to the healthy influence of the bath. After breakfast the sportsmen went out to the hills, with dogs and guns and gillies, forming a strong party. They lunched on the peak of a hill many miles from the encampment, and the echoes of their returning shots did not announce their coming towards home again until in time for a late dinner. The girls, nevertheless, spent a busy day: they proceeded to the river, and, at a little distance, among sheltering rocks, and on a smooth platform of heather grass, they constructed a drawing-room in the open air; seats were built of stones, a table was formed of wood and turf, crevices in the rocks served as windows, and were trellised by curtains and festoons of deer's-grass and bog myrtle; a fire-place, also, was contrived, and blazing logs of pine and birch sent up such a beacon flame to the hills, that the little kids came down in flocks, and perched on the rocky heights of the drawing-room walls, gazing in wonder on the doings beneath. The gentlemen returned just in time for dinner: their sport had been excellent, and their fatigue great; the hills being steeper here than around Dreumah. Mr. March-moram had bagged twenty-nine brace of birds, Auber nineteen, and Harold twenty-five: a capital day's work for the 25th of September.

Normal alone had gone after the deer, having followed a contrary beat to the others. He had shot a stag of royal head, and was in the highest spirits imaginable. Sport and natural history formed great part of the conversation at the tent dinner, and Normal described an incident he had witnessed that day, in which both were combined.

"Fancy, Glenbenrough! I saw, while crouching with Sandie behind the rock on the shoulder of Benaldie—an old fox deer-stalking! I suppose I might live to a hundred and not see such a thing again: it was so curious that I forgot my own stalk in watching reynard's. A nice little herd of hinds, with two of their calves amongst them, were grazing beneath, when suddenly a move took place, and they all looked about, sniffing uneasily: we knew it was not us, as the wind was blowing contrary. Presently, Sandie called out 'Look! look!' and there, on the lower hill right opposite us, we saw an old fox squatting behind a stone watching the deer, exactly like ourselves; but the wind was evidently blowing his scent *right down upon them*: as they moved, he moved, until they set off

at a startled trot round the base of the hill. Sandie and I darted higher up, and we saw the fox turn round and distinctly retrace his course ; running up the hill, down he came on the other side, meeting the deer in their circuit ! The scent, having altered, they quietly took to grazing again. He now began to creep on his belly, dragging his body after him, foot by foot, until he got within a few yards of the deer, when he slunk behind a stone ; and there he sat on his hind quarters, like a dog, with ears cocked, watching his game."

"But what had he in view, Normal ?" Ishbel asked.

"Of course he wanted the young calves."

"He would not have attempted to touch them, when guarded by their mothers, surely ?"

"No, he was too cunning for that : but, you know, the hinds leave their calves when very young, just as sheep do their lambs, amongst the rocks sometimes, while they go feeding in the neighbourhood. Ewen told me he was one day on the hill at Arduashien, watching a herd grazing, when suddenly he heard a squeaking noise, and one of the hinds galloped past to some underwood, where she had her calf concealed ; and there, sure enough, was a fox at its throat. She reared up and beat him off with her fore hoofs, uttering loud cries, until the whole herd gathered around her ; and in a few moments Reynard was in full chase, pursued by the whole troop, out of sight !"

After dinner the gentlemen proposed a very short adjournment to "the drawing-room" which the young ladies had described to them, just to see how it looked in the moonlight. Accordingly, the whole party sallied forth ; Ishbel leading the way, holding her father's hand. The night was still and starry, the moon swept majestically over a deep blue sky, the river shone and sparkled in her beams, and every tint on hill and rock showed distinctly : it was a night so beautiful in its heavenly splendour that you almost wished to hush the merry voices breaking the silence. Auber moved away from the others and stood alone upon a low rock at the river's edge ; Marchmoram was jesting with Ishbel, who still kept close at her father's side, and Harold was in converse with Norah. Esmé met a glance from the dark eyes of Auber, who advanced, and asked her to come down to the water ; he gave her his hand to descend the rocks, and then, as they stood there, he spoke. The music of his voice mingled magically with the rippling of the waters, and his words flowed in exquisite imagery of thought and language : no wonder Esmé felt fascinated ; and

when he told her that the moon made glorious the golden light of her hair, as he lifted up the long tresses and pressed them to his lips, and, taking her hand within both his, asked her why it was so cold, Esmé's heart beat strongly and fast. He told her of a beautiful wild loch, studded with water-lilies, which he had discovered among the hills; and that if she would come he would take her there to-morrow. Esmé whispered a soft assent. When they all returned to the tent, coffee was served; and then Glenbenrough proposed a general good-night; for the keen air and exercise of the past day called for early rest and sleep. He escorted his daughters to their shealing, and then sought his own couch in the tent; where he fell asleep with a heart and conscience freer and more unburdened than any other there—little Ishbel's, perhaps, alone excepted.

The sportsmen again started early next morning on their different beats, the girls sallied to their "drawing-room" and sat there part of the forenoon, with the companionship of Florh and books: at last they thought of their fishing-rods, which were lying on the thatched roof of the shealing: it was so low that an outstretched arm could easily reach them; indeed, the goats sometimes fancied a nibble on the top of the house, and sprang to it easily from the ground. So Florh went for the rods, and then she proceeded to the river with Norah and Ishbel. Esmé remained: she had heard a dog bark, and had seen Auber descending the opposite hill; he went to the tent, left his gun, despatched his gillies, and then came towards where she sat. He asked her if she was ready to visit the water-lilies; she rose and he led her through a gorge betwixt the hills, which were wholly unwooded at the Dual Ghu, along a path worn and channelled by the frequent floodings of the mountain torrents dashing down the rocky walls on every side. The gorge was steep and grand; it extended for nearly a mile, and then suddenly opened out upon a fairy spot of verdure; where banks of natural grass swept down to the edge of a lovely little loch, covered with water-lilies and thickly fringed round by weeping birches. The deer of the glen often came to drink, but never had an Englishman's foot rested here before. Auber led Esmé down to the edge, and proposed that they should sit down and rest ere they gathered the water-lilies—for this flower quickly fades.

"Do you understand the creed of Platonism, Esmé?"

"Yes, I think I do: I have read of it, Mr. Auber."

"But you have no sympathy with it? No, I can answer for you. Twenty years hence will be the time for you to enter into its safe requirements. You possess the qualities necessary for its enjoyment, Esmé; but they should lie latent until the way is prepared: the warmer promptings must be satisfied first. You are eminently fitted for both love and friendship; but you should defer the latter until you have exhausted the powers of the first. You are Marchmoram's little friend, I think?" he added abruptly.

Esmé, who had sat silent, her eyes fixed on the water, now started and blushed; but with all his art, Auber did not then guess why; for he boldly asked, "Do you think giving a kiss is a very naughty thing, Esmé?" And then, not to startle her by any fancied danger in the question, he took up some pebbles and flung them carelessly into the water.

"I never kiss any man save my father, Mr. Auber."

"Not even your cousin Normal?"

"No: not since the time we were children. Scotchmen don't care for kissing," Esmé added half absently.

Auber laughed. "Well, but you don't think there is any harm in it? Depend on it, kissing is as natural as shaking hands; and the conventionality which denies this is a most absurd one: it has only crept in within latter years!"

"You mean that it used to be the mode of salutation with our grandsires?" Esmé said, looking steadily at him. "I am glad I did not live in those days; my sense of propriety would have suffered sorely."

"Yes, when inclination was not consulted on the subject; but—but—that makes all the difference."

Esmé blushed deeply. He went on to say, with a softly searching smile and look,

"I am sure you very well understand the 'Love's Philosophy' of your favourite, Shelley: this is a day to repeat it." Esmé sank her head a little, and as he repeated the last lines she almost felt his breath stirring in the long golden ringlets of her hair:

"The fountains mingle with the river,
And the river with the ocean,
The winds of heaven mix for ever
With a sweet emotion;
Nothing in the world is single;
All things by a law divine
In one another's being mingle—
Why not I with thine?"

"See the mountains kiss high heaven,
 And the waves clasp one another;
 No sister flower would be forgiven
 If it disdained it's brother:
 And the sunlight clasps the earth,
 And the moonbeams kiss the sea;
 What are all these kissings worth
 If thou kiss not me?"

"Now, Esmé, will you kiss me?" he whispered, in a tone thrilling through the quick life-pulses of the girl. "I do not ask you to let me kiss you. Merely give me an innocent kiss upon my brow: it will be like balm to me, Esmé, for I am very wearied of the world."

His power was upon her; and, pursuing his advantage, he would have passed his arm around her waist; but, with a convulsive effort, she drew his arm away, and, keeping hold of his hand, replied, with averted face,

"No, no, no, never, Mr. Auber! Don't speak in this way to me."

"Ah, Esmé, give me one kiss of compassion, innocent and pure from your heart! chaste as the moonbeam on the troubled sea! I ask it not to allay the fever of a young and ardent spirit, but to calm and cheer a poor worn-out mind. Esmé, were I to tell you the story of my life, I feel I could again and again draw forth a sad and gentle kiss of compassion: 'tis all I ask."

Esmé put her hands before her face! for his voice touched the very depths of her womanly nature. Had Marchmoram been in Auber's place and craved what he did, the hot blood would have mounted from heart to brain, and she would have risen and fled from him as from dangerous temptation. As it was, with a suppressed sigh and suffused face, Esmé lifted up her head, and looking fully and gently into Auber's face, said,

"No, Mr. Auber, I will not: I cannot. You should not have asked it."

He gave her a reproachful smile, and then rose up: the blush was still upon her cheek. He broke down a branch from a birch tree and, going down to the water's edge, began to draw in the lilies.

"Marchmoram told me you called these Passion-flowers, Esmé?"

"Yes; I so delight in them."

"And do you know what passion is? 'Tis a craving admiration: when you see these flowers in their beauty you

long to possess them, and can't rest satisfied with the admiration of the eye. In looking down in summer from a burning height upon waving seas of cool delicious green forests of trees in full foliage, do you not long to spring down upon the leaves and revel and float amongst them, as you would seek to bathe in the sparkling waters of clear, tempting streams? This, Esmé, is passion, though mysterious and unacknowledged: ay, refine it as you will, this thirst for nature and beauty is *passion* pervading your nature!"

Esmé's blue eyes assumed a deeper hue, dilating softly, as, after a moment's hesitation, she replied: "No, Mr. Auher; there is no earthiness in that passion: in the thirst after enjoyment of the beautiful, as you have described it. That enthusiasm and rapturous love for nature is but the longing for the bliss which 'eye hath not seen, neither hath it entered in the heart of man to conceive;' but which all that is purer in our earthly nature gives us a mysterious, undefinable inspiration for! When the rainbow glories of the morning sky tempt the spirit to revel in its light of crimson and gold, or when we bow before the moonlight glory of the grand old hills, it is but an unknown spiritual appreciation of that more exceeding glory, striving against all the material feelings of our nature: it is very different from the passion you would have inferred."

Auher stood perfectly silent as she ceased speaking. A shade of sadness passed over his pale, dark face: his heart was touched: he felt foiled and rebuked. Yet he had not spoken falsely, when he had told Esmé he was world-weary: he was, and long had been. There was strength in the resolution of this young and sensitive girl, and the pure vitality of her nature kindled in him (*blasé*, worn-out, and unbelieving as he was) fresher feelings. He forgot that he had essayed to vitiate her.

"Now we must return to the Dual Ghu, Mr. Auher," said Esmé; "we will fill my hat with the lilies, and I will make a basin for them in the river, which will keep them long fresh."

They reached the shealing, and parted. Auher went up the hill to see if any of the returning sportsmen were in sight; Esmé entered her little sleeping-room. Norah and Ishbel were still at the river. Esmé threw her hat with the lilies upon the floor, and burying her face on the pillow of her little bed, she wept and she prayed. Poor Esmé! the penalty with her had ever paid. With strong impulses, and a sensitive

conscience, the struggle between them often came. She sobbed and wrung her hands, exclaiming,

"I wish I had never known them! I wish they had never come! I know I shall be miserable. Florh, Florh, my warning dream will come true! Oh, Godfrey Marchmoram, what shall I do?"

One had stood upon the heights above the little loch that day, who had sat him down to watch the deer, when his keen eye fell upon the two figures beneath: he raised his glass, and recognized Auber and Esmé. As they moved homewards he turned also, and very soon after their arrival Marchmoram went into his tent and laid aside his deer-stalking glass.



CHAPTER XIII.

A HIGHLAND VASSAL'S HOSPITALITY.—SECRET INFLUENCE

"O' there is ane, a secret ane,—
Aboon them a' I like him better."

"Thy step maun be the first, Charlie,
'Mang the free and brave:
There's a crown an' throne for thee, Charlie!
For me ——"

WE must now revert to Florh Mackenzie, Esmé's foster-mother, who had latterly kept silent and aloof. There were weighty matters on Florh's mind: she had not spoken to Esmé again on the subject of Jeanie Cameron, and the Italian valet's surmise of her guilt with Mr. Marchmoram, since that evening at Glenbenrough; yet not the less, but rather the more, strongly did her own views concentrate on that, and on another subject also partly connected with it. Florh had ever possessed great influence over Esmé, not only as being her foster-mother (a very strong tie in the Highlands), but from the knowledge she had of Esmé's disposition, and the native tact with which her shrewdness helped her to use it. Next to her son Ewen, Florh loved her foster children, Esmé Mac Neil and Normal Mac Alastair, best of all on earth; and the union of these two had ever been her chiefest project: she regarded their mutual happiness, and the advancement of her son, as *dependent* on its accomplishment. Ewen's fortunes hung upon his young master's; for he never would have sought any

other service ; and with Esmé as his mistress, Florh knew he would be safe for life in the indulgence of a foster brother and sister : Florh's foresight extended even to his old age, and she fancied him installed in the snuggest shealing in Arduashien. She had ever regarded Esmé's nature as an impetuous torrent full of breaks and windings, but she felt sure that all she had to do was to follow and watch its devious course, and that, as its force exhausted itself, the stream would flow calmly at last ; so only by occasional words she let Esmé see that fate quite intended she should be the wife of Normal and Lady of Arduashien, and that Ewen should devote the latter days of his life to her and Normal's service. Now, however, unforeseen clouds hung darkening over the sunny landscape of her visionary prospect ; and how to avert the coming storm and ruin, required all that mental strength and tact which intuitively this Highland peasant-woman felt she possessed ; to Florh Macenzie pondering nightly on her heather bed, her mental plans and strategy and careful prevision connected with these few human beings, appeared a scheme involving as much boldness, risk, and difficulty as ever taxed the mind of a statesman. That early dream of Esmé's which she had read so strangely true,—was it not immediately afterwards that the man of that name had alighted in Glenbenrouh ? The intimacy of Godfrey Marchmoram with Esmé had progressed ; and, even though all outward appearances had contradicted it, Florh would have felt that a mutual interest must ensue betwixt him and Esmé : some dangerous crisis must arise sooner or later ; for her predictions never failed. Even now she saw the coming danger ; for the dream was in process of fulfilment. There was Norah, whose calm soft eye drooped too frequently beneath the bright gaze of English Harold, and followed too steadfastly his every graceful movement and gesture ; however, all was sunshine here, for truth and honour were read distinctly in Harold's frank and noble countenance : even Florh's eye fell not coldly on him. But Esmé, dear Esmé ! A pang of jealousy, for the sake of her favourite bairn, shot through Florh's brain. Should she be swept away ? No ! not while her foster-mother had strength to stretch forth her helping arm, and guide her to safe and friendly protection. Hatred of Marchmoram was deeply rooting in Florh's lowly but resolute heart. Could she avert his influence from her foster-children ? for if he won Esmé's heart did he not also stab Normal's ? ~~Was she~~ *Was she* able finally to regain Jeanie—the bride long

promised, now blighted—for her best-beloved son Ewen, she could have nearly forgiven all, in the triumph of her ultimate success ; but were she defeated, and all these evils to come upon her, then the end of her life would be blackness.

Normal had not taken Ewen with him to the Dual Ghu : the evening before the party left Glenbenrough, Norah had asked him not to do so, as it was evident he was disagreeable to Mr. Marchmoram ; so Normal had assented. Ewen was aware of the cause of his being left behind, and his mother learnt it also : with Ewen it rankled deeply ; yet he occupied himself by taking a little journey on Mr. Marchmoram's behalf, which he had arranged to do some time before. Florh was well aware that to succeed in her plans she must be subdued and patient, so she betrayed no feeling which might mar any influence or interest at Glenbenrough ; and when Marchmoram crossed her path at Dual Ghu, she dropped a courtesy and gave him homied smiles. To Ishbel she occasionally confided a few gibes against the Englishmen of Dreumah ; but when Ishbel tried to change Florh's opinions she generally found herself worsted by some unconquerable Scottish prejudice.

Florh was a very pleasant companion for the girls ; she sat on the river banks, and sang wild Gaelic songs to them, or told tales of bygone Highland days and families ; she wandered up the hills, and taught them the properties of different herbs ; of the two wild orchids, one of which makes a potent love-philtre, and the other cures the stricken flocks of the shepherd ; and of the bog-myrtle, famed as a spell against the Brownie, and for use at the rites of Hallowe'en. The girls turned the bog-myrtle to epicurean purpose, and taught the Dreumah men that a few sprigs of it dipped in claret and water gives an aromatic flavour never equalled by borage. Indeed Florh's companionship formed one of the most piquant enjoyments of this out-door life. The truest pleasure to her was the daily proximity of her beloved Normal : it was but seldom that she could see him so continuously as now, and her chief moments of mental relaxation were when, from her evening seat by the shealing door, she proudly compared his manly form and bearing with those of the Englishmen (for Normal always wore the Highland dress), or triumphantly saw his gillies returning laden with better spoil than theirs.

On the day that Esmé had gone to the water-lily loch, two *dishes of fish*, caught by Norah and Ishbel, graced the dinner table ; they consisted of trout, and a large pike roasted, the

latter having been a capture of Norah's. The gentlemen, as in gallantry bound, praised the sport of the young ladies, and Harold in particular, after much discussion on fishing in general, hinted at last that he would prefer it to shooting, if allowed his choice. Esmé offered her rod with alacrity, and it was settled that he should try and catch a pike the next morning, in company with Norah and Ishbel. This little arrangement suddenly extended into a much more comprehensive one, and some of those present thought Harold's spirits consequently lowered again, as he looked anything but gregariously inclined; however, he brightened up a few moments afterwards, whispering to Norah, "This must not count for *our* fishing day; it has only been postponed." Glenbenrough proposed that the whole party should fish up the river as far as the dwelling of Mr. Macrae, the tenant of the Dual Ghu; and that there they should lunch, and either ride or walk back in the evening. Accordingly, with the laird's usual promptness, a gillie was at once despatched to the old vassal, bidding him prepare to give them welcome on the morrow. The river was navigable for a coble up to within a hundred yards of Macrae's house; it ran on a level through the hills up to that point, and then the waters deepened, and in broken rapids, amidst sunken and sharp-edged rocks, rushed on to two broad, deep falls, the roaring of which was a nightly lullaby to the people in the house, and there was a scrambling path the whole way along the bank. Next morning the whole party started from the shealing with fishing gear and tackle; the coble was for the use of those who fished with the otter;* and rude rods of birch, with pieces of scarlet fringe, cut from Florh's shawl, tied on to the line, were in readiness for those who wished to tempt the pike. Norah, Ishbel, and Harold made rather a noisy party in the boat, and the "otter" scarce needed any eccentric twitch, for the jerking and meandering course of the coble, as they pulled contrary strokes, and shifted from side to side, made the "otter" dance more vigorously than needful. Esmé, Norah, and Marchmoram fished for pike over the edge of the bank; the latter would have condescended to no other kind of fishing, but the slaying of this "tyrant of the flood" gave him some excitement: it gratified him to strike an almost savage blow upon the cruel, open mouth of the fish as it grasped on the

* A wooden board, leaded so as to float perpendicularly, and adjusted by laniards on the principles of the kite; the leading string furnished with swivels and tippets, to which the hooks are attached.

shore. They were successful, and caught four large pike. When about half a mile from the rapids, Glenbenrough called to the boat party to land, as the path to the house diverged a little from the river's course. They had caught a few trout, despite the disadvantageous handling of the "otter," and all the rods, the slain pike, etc., were put into the coble. Harold volunteered to row it further up, to where a small wooden pier ran out; and, fastening it there, a bearer from the house could run down for the fish, which were to figure at the luncheon.

As they all turned up the bank, Glenbenrough called to Harold to row steadily when he came near the pier, for if he shot a very few yards past it the boat might run into the rapids. Norah walked last of the party, and it so happened that she stopped twice to fasten the ribbon of her shoe; both times she met the straining gaze of Harold, as he pulled slowly out of sight, and both times a deeper glow of pleasure tinged her cheek. He looked very handsome in his loose shepherd tartan dress; it suited his tall, athletic figure, and the sun-bright English complexion, with masses of chestnut hair clustering on a brow that showed intellect as well as birth,—a clear, high patrician brow, with truthful eyes of pure blue: never did face attest more vividly nobleness of nature. The path led down to a small old house, built of dark slatestone, with curious little windows like loop-holes, from which Prince Charlie had often looked out upon the huge bleak guardian hills encasing him in on every side; for he had more than once found shelter there in his wanderings. Upon the rocky background stood large fanks for the sheep and cattle, low stone walls, forming a square, and divided into compartments, in which the division and wool-clipping of the sheep take place in summer, and the cattle seek shelter in the storms of winter. A few green birches were scattered over the bank in front, sloping down to the river, which went seething and boiling past in quite a different mood from that it showed higher up. Intervening banks concealed the mighty fall, from whence the water rushed on in dark turbulent haste; but the noise of it sufficiently told its power and depth. Old Macrae surrounded by a staff of shepherds, came down to meet them, bearing a huge green bottle filled with whisky, and a glass of antediluvian shape; trembling with nervous delight, he welcomed his beloved laird and his family, by pouring out a bumper with upraised hand, and giving *the old Gaelic* toast, which conferred in the eyes of the Highlanders, only legitimate honour. "Mac Neil agus an Bigh!"

(Mac Neil and the King). Then, first sipping from the glass himself, he handed it round to all present.

The room which the party were shown into was, indeed, bare of furniture; but more space remained for the large deal table, which, covered by a snow-white table-cloth, occupied the centre. Abundant materials for a proper Highland feast were spread upon it: a choice venison ham, smoked and dried a year ago, grouse and kippered salmon, fresh fish from the river, eggs boiled, roasted, and fried, goat-milk cheese, and oat-cakes; small wooden dishes filled with rich curds and cream being placed beside each plate. A huge turf fire blazed on the hearthstone, and a table drawn near it bore a goodly array of bottles of spruce beer and smuggled whisky; sugar and steaming kettles of water being ready to meet any demand for toddy. The sight of this collation, coupled with the previous hours of exercise, roused every appetite; but Glenbenrough declared that a few minutes' grace must be given to Harold, who had so unselfishly gone through his solitary duty with the coble: he ought, indeed, to have been there before them, for they had taken a circuit when they left the river; and as the allotted moments passed, every one said he must have mistaken the way.

Meanwhile Harold had rowed slowly down the stream, his eye lingering on the vanishing scene before him, when a sudden jerk aroused him from a reverie, and shook him from his seat; at the same instant, the coble darted forward with an impetuosity that almost pulled the oar from his hand, and in a moment his eye caught the little wooden pier, jutting out nearly ten yards higher up. The rapids lay not two yards below, and he was already in the rush of the water: he heard the roaring of the fall a little farther on: his danger was imminent. With lips compressed and knitted brow, Harold put out the full strength of his arm, and with the weak oar battled manfully against the striving current. But what could physical strength and will do with so frail a boat against the momentarily-increasing stress of the current? A moment's indecision, and Harold would have been surely lost; but his self-possession failed not: with every muscle braced, with steady nerve, and an eye watchful and keen, he stood balancing himself in the rocking boat, ready to make a spring at the critical moment. A ridge of rock ran out amidst the spray, which almost veiled the first grand leap of the fall; and this slippery rock was his only hope of safety. As b

sprang, the coble rebounded beneath him, and then, lightened, drifted on to the edge of the fall. He clung to the slippery rock, over which the boiling eddy burst in a cloud of spray: the rush of the water nearly deafened him; but his nerves were well strung, and unflinchingly he kept his hold. Then, clutching at each crevice in the rock, he climbed up, his hands bleeding as he slowly and painfully advanced, until he reached the top; when he slid to the point nearest to the shore, from which he was separated by a deep dark pool. Dashing the spray from his eyes, he marked where the eddy ran close to the edge beneath him; then, with a bound, he plunged right into the centre of the pool, beyond the eddy, and swam to the bank. He scrambled up and stood upon the heather, shaking the wet from him like a water-dog; and then, with an upward glance at the bright blue sky, he ejaculated a few words of heartfelt thankfulness to God.

Old Macrae was not aware of the absence of one of the party, or that they waited for him; but while Glenbenrough within was talking of sending a gillie in search of Harold, the old man, standing at the open window, saw something that made him hastily leave the room, restraining the expression of any emotion, lest it might alarm or disturb his guests; but once out of the room, he hurried down to the river bank, and there he saw the riven planks of a coble floating past. There must have been death on the water—whose he knew not; it might even have been his only son, who had rowed up the river from the wooden pier that morning: twice in his own long life had the waterfall carried a corpse to his door. Uttering low moans of "Och hone! och hone!" and grasping his staff in his hand, the old man ran up the rocky path, and scrambled up and down the edge of the fall, his eye seeking restlessly the pools above and beneath; when suddenly he came in sight of Harold, walking leisurely down the path. Harold hailed Macrae with his clear, kindly voice:

"Good day, Mr. Macrae. Where are you going?"

"Going!" exclaimed the old man, with a face of awe and terror. "A boat has swirled past from the fall, and I am going a sorrowful gait to find the corpse."

"Go no farther, Mr. Macrae; here it is!" and smiling with playful *sang froid*, Harold turned the old man by the shoulder homewards. For a moment Macrae was dumb; then *seizing Harold's arm*, he clapped him vehemently on the *shoulder*, and burst forth into a flow of high-wrought Gaelic

enlogium. Here was the spirit of Highland valour—contempt of life and danger! It went home straight to the old man's heart, and called up memories of the past age—Mac Neils and Macraes of ancient days, who would laugh at death, in sport or war.

Macrae had not been gone ten minutes, when one of the shepherds, who had also observed the floating planks on the river, communicated it to the others lounging about in front of the house. Glenbenrough, observing a slight stir amongst them, and missing Macrae from the room at the same moment, went out; the first word uttered by the men was sufficient, and with a strong epithet on their apathy, he darted up the bank, and ran in the same direction as Macrae, with the swiftness of a lad of sixteen: had he at that moment seen Harold in the death struggle, he would have plunged in to his assistance at the risk of his own life. Some foreboding instinct led Marchmoram to sally out soon after, and, asking no questions, he quickly followed after Glenbenrough; then the others all came out and stood in chill uncertainty at the door: a dreadful, undefined feeling weighed upon all; but it was scarcely realized, ere it was dissipated by the appearance of Harold descending towards them. There was one left within the house, whose ear had been eagerly listening to every sound without, ever since they entered, watching for the approaching step of the missing one, and longing for the bright smile that was to flood the room with light to her; and when the perturbed movement came, succeeded by a portentous silence, and all went out after Glenbenrough and Marchmoram, a sickening terror struck cold on Norah, and sinking on her seat, she sat shuddering, with clenched hands, alone. In another moment she heard his voice, and knew that he was safe; but she still sat, overcome with the revulsion of feeling: she could not rise and go out to join the welcome. It was a few moments ere the usual strength of her self-control returned; and then, when it did, she went out, and the cordial voice and smile with which she greeted Harold, betrayed not that she had a deeper interest in him, or that she felt a different pride in him from that of others. As old Macrae poured forth his praises of the spirit, courage, and *sang froid* with which Harold had faced and conquered the peril, Esmé whispered to Norah, "It was not the feeling of the stoic;" and Norah knew that was true. Harold had wound his handkerchief round his hand, his fingers having got lacerated in grasping the rock; and as they were enterin

for lunch, at last, he said that he really was fit for nothing but fishing now: he certainly should not be able to draw a trigger again that season on the Dual Ghu. Champagne took the place of spruce beer at the lunch; but while it and the merriment were going merrily round, Norah suddenly sank back in her chair: she half-fainted, and her cheek paled to a deathly white. They said the heat of the fire had been too much for her; so her father and Esmé drew her into the fresh air, and Esmé stayed by her until she recovered and resumed her place in the social cheeriness. But that night poor Norah's dreams were sadly disturbed: visions of a drowning man, in spectre-like shapes of horror, ever and anon affrighted her soul.

Old Macrae sat at the head of his table during the feast, and as he urged his guests, by precept and example, to pledge more frequently in the smuggled whisky, he proudly reminded the laird of a feast given once at Strathshielie, where, by every man's plate, stood a bottle of pure Bordeaux.

"That's fit for youngest sons, my Leddy Mac Neil," said I; "but gie me a bottle o' whisky, and, glass by glass and stoup for stoup, I'll drink it fair to their claret! And mind ye yon night returning hame, laird, when young Davidson o' Kinbrae fell senseless off his horse, and I, Kenneth Macrae, sober on nigh as much whisky as he had drunk of claret, carried him seven miles on my back?"

The Englishmen could not be induced to taste the smoked deer ham; though that was a great mistake on their part, at which Ishbel laughed, and saucily said to Marchmoram,

I could almost wish that those hampers of luxuries you sent from Dreumah had been lost on the way, since you can't relish our fare."

"Some of its peculiarities I certainly don't: as for others, *vide* these wrecks of grouse and kippered salmon, Miss Ishbel! But there is no doubt," Marchmoram retaliated, "*that* was what prevented the Romans from attempting the subjugation of the North. Don't think it was dread of your prowess; it was merely dread of famine: they knew they could get nothing to eat on their march."

"Horrid epicures!" exclaimed Ishbel.

"Apropos of Rome," interrupted Glenbenrough, "I think we should have some Gaelic Olympic games here this evening. *What would you say to our giving the lads some prizes for feats of jumping, running, and tossing the caber?*"

The proposition was popular with all, and to none more than

the old host, who hastily went out and speedily called a gathering. A long flat of turf by the margin of the river was the spot selected; and when the whole party arrived there, they found about forty men and lads already collected; all keen for rivalry and display. It was a curious wild scene when the games began. The shades of evening were already lengthening on the hills and darkening the water, and the echoes rang with the shrill yells and shouts of the competitors. Gaunt kilted men wielded the caber with naked arms, their red uncombed hair streaming back on the wind as they ran races or made flying leaps; and at last they took to the river, and swam with mad eagerness from side to side. A small cask of whisky was then broached, and Macrae dispensed it unlimitedly; but it seemed as if early habit and the severe exercise prevented its having any bad effect, outwardly at least. It was now time to return, but not until further hospitality had been offered and accepted. Ruddy-faced maidens appeared bearing trays of good hot tea, richest cream, and oat-cakes and butter, of which the party partook in the open air; and then the huge green bottle and glass were produced, and the whole party tasted the "Deoch an doruis" (stirrup cup) preparatory to starting. The moon was bright, and they all agreed to walk; old Macrae took the lead, as he was to convoy them (*selon la règle*) part of the way. Esmé had had no conversation with Marchmoram all day. He had been in one of his forbidding moods; excited for the time whilst fishing for and slaying the pike, but with no geniality or animal spirits in him. He was often enough thus grave, or absent; and none of his friends ever seemed to wish to interfere with the former mood, or disturb the latter. Esmé followed in the rear, between Normal and Ishbel, but they had not gone far when Auber joined them and told Ishbel that old Macrae was relating a ghost-story in the front. Ishbel instantly ran forward, and, as Auber smiled, Normal cast a bitter look at him and Esmé, and went after Ishbel: Esmé saw it. Auber lowered his voice for conversation.

"Do not walk so fast, Esmé, and I will tell you a story too."

"Look, Mr. Auber, Mr. Marchmoram is all alone; we ought to join him."

Auber bit his lip, as the next step brought her to his friend's side; Marchmoram looked up as they joined him, then looked down again, and walked on without a word. Auber began to talk of Harold's adventure.

"By-the-by, we must be near the spot ; he shall point it out to me ;" and he moved on, leaving Esmé alone with Marchmoram. This ease or indifference he knew ought to pique her.

"Your thoughts are very far away, Mr. Marchmoram," Esmé said at last, after they had proceeded some way in silence.

"Yes, Esmé," he replied, looking down kindly upon her, but with a contraction on his brow, and deep thought in his eyes ; "I was thinking it was time for me to put out to sea."

"Do you mean to go away?" she asked, as with parted lips she gazed upon his face : hers looked very pale in the moonlight.

"I must go into Parliament, Esmé, and do the work I was born for. This has been ever before me : and I have delayed it until I had attained sufficient maturity to guarantee success. I am strong enough now for the battle, and must be up and doing."

"Rest a little while longer, Mr. Marchmoram," and poor Esmé spoke in a more pleading tone than she was aware of : "when once you enter, it will be long ere you pause again : a long life is before you. Your resolution will not lose, though you delay it."

"Ah ! Esmé, you should not speak in this way ; but rather urge me on : the wide ocean invites, and out upon it my bark must be launched : I dare not linger longer by the lake of the lily." He spoke this hurriedly ; but at the last words a gleam of tenderness beamed on Esmé's pale face. She looked up, with a slight curve of the lip, and a calm proud smile, and answered slowly and distinctly, without a tremble in her voice.

"No, you should not. If you feel thus ready, and have work before you, you should go out and begin it. Life will not be long enough for you."

They were both silent for a time. Marchmoram then said,

"Esmé, though my mind is dedicated to practical work, still I have some imagination in me, else I could not appreciate you."

"And, Mr. Marchmoram, I may say I understand you ; for though you may think me a dreamer, still I feel I could throw that mood off, and enter heartily into the stirring realities of life."

"Therefore, Esmé, there is not a little mutual sympathy *between us* ; in fact, we are very nearly counterparts, in the *true sense* of the term."

Esmé did not reply ; and they again moved on in silence.

When Marchmoram next spoke, his tone was wholly different. "Look!" he said, pointing to the river flowing still and solemnly by their path; "did you ever see anything more beautiful? See the water, tremulous in the moonbeams, flowing in a tide of molten silver; and look how vividly the moonlight brings out the colouring of the grassy banks, and the gray and purple hills. There is a little loch not far from this, where water-lilies grow: do you know it, Esmé? It would look exquisite on a night like this."

"I know it," she replied, and a deep blush spread over her face, which had been pale as marble before. "Mr. Auber brought me there."

"Ah!" exclaimed Marchmoram, absently; and then, with a lowered tone, "You think Auber very agreeable?"

"Yes; very."

"You must do so: no man is more undeniably thought so; and no man has been more fortunate than myself in having for so many years enjoyed such society as his."

"You are great friends, Mr. Marchmoram," Esmé said in a low voice.

"Yes, Esmé." And then he spoke in deep and earnest tones, but with a nervous twitch of the severe thin lip, and with eyes which moved restlessly, but never once sought hers, as they slowly walked on.

"His father and mother died years ago, and he was left an only son. I was an only son, too, but my father died not a year ago. Auber's intellect acquired strength early, and he reached his manhood young; early his own master, he indulged freely the gratification of his impulses: a wayward fancy urged him on, and his faculties and tastes had full scope for exercise. But I, Esmé, only now intend to begin life, the vitality of which is already almost dying out with Auber; and in my career I will enjoy what he now can never reach! By long concentration I have gained in depth what he has wasted in speed; and, as in act, so in feeling, Esmé."

Here Marchmoram turned, and gave her one lightning glance from his deep dark eyes, which thrilled throughout her frame.

"But my friend Auber, whom all know to be fascinating, does not love: he never has loved; he will not love truly. Think not I betray him, Esmé: I have seen him seek for love before; I have seen him elicit it from others as young and fair as you, and I have left it to themselves to discover, and to re

it: but it shall not be so now. Esmé, beware of the evil angel! I saw him at the lily loch——” and here Marchmont grasped the hand which Esmé had put before her face, and the keen fire of his eyes almost blazed upon her as he spoke. He clutched her hand with the strength of a vice, as Esmé tried to free it, and his voice was deep and harsh; but a change came over him, and he threw her hand from him with a rough tenderness, and then strode on to join the others. They were but a few yards from the encampment.



CHAPTER XIV.

ADVENTURES AND LEAVE-TAKING.

——Excisemen in a bustle,
 Seizin' a stell,
 Triumphant crushin't like a mussel
 Or lampet shell.—BURNS.

“Douglas has laid bye his bassenet,
 The King his hawk, and gude gray hounde,
 And Harry Maxwell's ta'en his bent,
 An' it's hey, an' it's hey for English ground.”

FLORR returned from the Dual Ghu a day sooner than the rest of the party, and after executing some commissions at Glenbenrough on which Norah had purposely despatched her, she proceeded to her own cottage. Neither Huistan nor Ewen were within doors; but she knew one or other must be at home, for the embers of a turf fire burnt on the hearth, and soon after her arrival they both made their appearance. Huistan had been away for some days, and on foot nearly the whole time; having gone with his faithful collies, Conas and Frenchen, to distant hills in search of a missing score of sheep, which he and his dogs were now driving home before them; and his heart was cheered, when, from a distant height, he came in sight of the smoke issuing from his mother's cottage chimney. As Huistan, thankful in heart, though worn and wearied in limb, came plodding onwards, he had met with an adventure which so broadly touched his sense of the ludicrous, that, as he afterwards said, it sent him home quite “spirited up” again. Stopping to look down on Lochandhu, where a deep wild ravine opened winding from the neighbouring hills, there came a dis-

tant echo of a terrible yell upon Huistan's startled ear. The next moment he saw old Ian Mohr advancing at full speed, wildly rushing through the trees, his broad blue bonnet off, his long white hair streaming in the breeze, and his plaid dragging after him on the ground. As he came nearer, Huistan saw water dripping from his clothes, elbows, and knees.

"Hout tout! hout tout! Halt ava, halt ava! what's this?" cried Huistan, as he ran forward to intercept Ian's mad career. But the old man rushed past him with irrestrainable impetus, and darted on a few paces beyond ere he stopped. Then, however, turning back, he with trembling grasp seized Huistan's hand; his wrinkled face was ash-coloured, and his old voice quaked with terror.

"Och, stop him! stop him!" he gasped in Gaelic; "he's after me, at last! I'm old—very old; and I never yet encountered him like this afore!"

"What? who, man?" Huistan exclaimed. "I thoct nae mortal thing could daunton ye!"

"Neither could it; but it's the de'il, man!" Ian replied, dropping his voice to a whisper, and glancing fearfully backwards.

"Lord be about us!" cried Huistan, and he staggered back for a moment against a tree.

"Aye, say that, say that! Pray ye, pray ye! keep him aff!" ejaculated old Ian, again taking a protecting grasp of Huistan. "He had me nigh by the shuther: his vera grip was on my throat! Oh! Huistan, ye'se such a guid lad, an' aye read your Bible on the hill; maybe I am wrang to tak the deer, when the Sassenachs pay their money for 't. Not a grain wad I ever gie in to them; but noo, if they've got the de'il to tak care o' their goods, Lord, Lord! I can stand it no langer! If the de'il's to come into the purty stag, an' tak wing wi' the ptarmigan an' grouse, Lord! ae things are cursed an' changed thegither."

"But hoo? but hoo?" exclaimed Huistan, with awakened interest.

"He caught me at the rinnin stream. I was up in Glen Madhu early the morn. Ye ken the Dreumah keeper is up in the laird's country if the noo; an' I heard there was a bonny herd last night in the glen, so I aff wi' my ain auld flint, and never did I mark an easier quarry. I had nae stalk ava, for I shot the bonniest stag o' the season three hours syne, as he stooped to drink at the rowan spring. When I had left the eagles their share o' him there, I gat him lightened on my

back ; but still he was heavy as leid : I went crumpled to the ground under his weight : the burden was na canny——”

“Ye hae no shot ane the year afore, Ian,” interrupted Huistan. “Maybe ye’re ain increase o’ age made that——”

“Na, na ! Bide a wee !” said Ian, shivering. “When I dragged down to the river, I plunged in, the bonny legs fast round my neck. Half way through, the evil ane cam ! He louped on me wi’ a stound, I was gripped by the throat and dragged back in the water. The de’il gripped me, man, and rove the staig from my back. I gae a skriech, an’ a loup, an’ saw the hoofs o’ beast, an’ o’ de’il, plunge up a’ thegither in the water. Wi’ my ain strength I cleared them baith and got on to the dry land ; then, man, man, I ran for my sowl !”

Huistan grasped something he had concealed in the folds of his plaid on his breast, and made a step for the ravine, as he said firmly,

“Come back wi’ me, Ian : we maun see to this.”

“No, dinna gae, dinna gae ! I ’ll no gae wi’ ye ! I could na, an’ I darena, bide here my lane without ye !” exclaimed Ian, clutching him vehemently.

“Weel, weel,” Huistan muttered ; and he hesitated also : a faint feeling of natural superstition made his strong step and willing heart almost quake ; but the next moment he drew out his Bible from his plaid, and gave it into Ian’s hand.

“Sit ye down wi’ that, Ian, an’ ye’se safe, though they come as legion. Haud it for a safeguard. I’m no feared, mysel’, for de’il, or bodach, or bogle ;” and he strode off, as the old man sat him down, crouching in the heather. Here was true courage, with its highest attributes ; for poor Huistan, in his unselfish surrender of the Bible, parted with the armour he alone trusted in for himself. The ravine, thickly wooded, wound down to the river edge ; and, as Huistan emerged, his eye fell on a vaguely terrible object. Not ten paces from him, something moved in the water ; it was black and hairy, and the points of what seemed long ears or horns, momentarily appeared and vanished. With a loud, wild ejaculation in Gaelic prayer, Huistan plunged boldly in. “Beir uainn ! Beir uainn !” (away—away with thee !) he cried, as he grappled with a bulky moving mass. A pair of glazed brown eyes turned upward in the water, as, with nervous grasp, Huistan clung on to Ian’s *fine slain deer* ! The head and legs were fast caught amidst the dense strong branches of a knotted thorn that had stranded *ad long lain* there beneath the deep rapid current. Unper-

ceived by Ian, the horns of the deer had got entangled as the head hung down from the old man's back when wading through the stream. Conas and Frenchen were soon busy at the work of release, and splashed and barked in noisy glee in the water, as their master's loud, honest laughter woke the echoes round. Huistan soon dragged out the stag, and laid him safe on the sunny bank, and then hurried back to Ian; his loud laughter travelled onward to Ian's astonished ear, its cheery sound in strange contrast to the old man's own yells of terror a short time previously. It was sad, yet amusing, to see how quickly the raling passion resumed its sway in Ian's breast the moment he thought it might with safety return. He became garrulous in gratitude to Huistan and in exculpation of himself, and absolutely abjured all the slight hints of repentance which fear had wrung from him a few moments before: indeed, he became triumphant in a confirmed belief of his impunity.

"Na, na, lad!" he exclaimed, as he leant gloating over his rescued prey, putting his finger into the bullet-wound, and lovingly feeling the fat on the haunches, "I'll no gie up my sport. I'll no believe I'm wrang. They ne'er can hae rightsome right to the free beasts an' birds o' the hill. E'en the de'il himsel', ye see noo, wad nae demean himsel' to abet them! Ne'er a fear nor a dout (thanks to ye, Huistan, lad) will e'er hinder Ian Mohr again!"

"Weel, Ian, weel," Huistan replied, in a dissatisfied tone; "it's no conscienceable, say what ye will; but ye're ower auld to be argued now: syne ye hae shot this deer, be satisfied, and gae after nae more o' them the year. Is it me tak a haunch? na, na! I'd sooner hunger for three days, Ian! An' I'll tell ye what: ye ken it's the heid, an' no the venison itsel' so much, thae English sportsmen prize. Noo gie me a promise, ye'll cut aff the heid—see it's a royal ane—and lay it some dark night at the door of Dreumah Lodge. Since ye hae stown the stag, gie them the benefit o' the heid, whatever." Huistan, ere he left him, extracted this promise; which Ian afterwards honourably fulfilled. It was the only amends which Huistan's influence could attain, and the only satisfaction which he could apply to his own honest views on the subject.

When Huistan reached the cottage, he found his mother safely re-installed there, and employed in mashing the potatoes for dinner: Ewen also sat by the hearth. Huistan welcomed his mother warmly, as he hung up his plaid and bonnet, and threw himself, wearied, down; but Florh did not appear to be

in very equable temper : she answered his inquiries shortly, and glanced crossly at Ewen, who, though silent now, had been talking and laughing the moment before Huistan's entrance. The potatoes and herrings were steaming on the table, and Huistan had just asked for the blessing upon them, when Ewen again burst into a sulky laugh ; his small eyes twinkled maliciously, and he rubbed his hands together.

"It's no the money they'll grudge," he muttered, as if absently : "it's no the money ; but, oh ! it's his high English pride ! Oh ! to think o' the Lowland gaugers gaeing hurrying into his hoose ; to hae them handling an' rummaging in his very bedroom ! the vera plate kists, wi' his English badge, a' turned upsides down ; his papers a' tossed out ! An' then the newspapers ! It's no lang accounts o' their grand sport will noo appear, o' the game they hae shot ; but the Procurator Fiscal's warrant for their defrauding o' the Queen ! He'll be disgraced : he'll be disgraced in the public papers ! "

Huistan looked up.

"What's this ye're sayin', Ewen ? "

"What I canna approve mysel'," Florh replied shortly, answering for him. "That's too mean a revenge, to my thinking : I'm ashamed o' it, Ewen. May it never be traced to bairn o' mine ! He has informed on the whisky lying at Dreumah."

Huistan's sun-burnt face almost visibly paled, and then flared into crimson again, as he stared at his brother with pained and startled looks.

"Ewen ! an' ye my brither ? Speak ye o' English disgrace in the papers ? Nae, but think o' Hieland cunning and meanness ! I'll gae daft ; I'll gae daft ! The laird's ain freends and tenants, too ! What wad the laird think o' it ? Let me oot, let me oot, till I stop them ! "

Pushing aside his untasted dinner, Huistan sprang to his feet ; Ewen jumped up, too, and, with knitted brow, stood before him.

"Mind ye're ain business, an' I'll mind mine," he said doggedly.

"Hinder me no ! " cried Huistan, pulling down his bonnet from the nail. "I'll save the name o' Mackenzie from disgrace." He threw Ewen to the side with one hand, and reached the door ; but Florh rushed forward and intercepted him : she stood at her full height and spoke as with the authority of ancient despotic rule.

"Hear ye, hear ye!" she cried, "I desire ye na to go. I hae twa sons; the ane has acted gainst my knowledge, but the ither shall nae act against my desires! Wad ye gae an' turn informer, noo, against your brither?"

Huistan curled his lip proudly as he stood there, inflexible as his imperious mother; much like her in attitude of defiant pride, but with the might of right on his side.

"Trust to me no to do that," he said; "but go I shall, and he and ye shall yet thank me."

"I forbid ye!"

"Mither, I canna obey ye," Huistan replied, and, darting past her, he got outside and ran down the bank of the loch. Ewen, as he stood at the cottage door, sent a shrill laugh after him.

"Better to hae saved ye're breath for ye're dinner," he cried. "Ye're ower late; ye're ower late."

"It seems my ryle o'er my bairns is drawing to an end," Florh said bitterly, as she turned within. "Oh, Ewen, what wad my noble Normal think o' ye the day? Gin ever this comes to his ears he'd for ever cast ye out."

Huistan thought not of hunger or fatigue as he ran, but on reaching the rocky barrier of Erickava, he stopped a moment to order back his dogs, who, ever faithful, had followed, and then he sped on. When he came to the bridge which spanned the Nightach, he again stopped: he was breathless, and took a draught of water; then proceeded more leisurely, but at a rapid walk, by the margin of the river. As he went stumbling on over the stony, heathery track, his eyes sought restlessly the horizon far and near; at last, with an exclamation of joy, he saw, not a hundred paces before him, but with the breadth of the river between, that which he had so eagerly looked for. Advancing through the birches came a body of strong-looking, well-dressed men; there might be seven or eight all dressed in dark blue uniform, and Huistan, from where he stood, could see the glittering of steel weapons, pistols, and cutlasses in their belts. This was no secret expedition of espionage, when the gangers go separately and in disguise to entrap unwary possessors of smuggled stores, or to prowl in search of a suspected still; they were going boldly, on legitimate information, with the certainty of capture, and of a large share of the imposed fine: which also, under the circumstances, was not likely to be a mitigated one. The gangers walked rapidly, but quite steadily; for they knew very well that their approach was quite unsuspected, and that they were not in the

least likely to meet with any one who could turn to give timely warning. However, they had not not pursued their course by the river for any great distance, when one of the number looking back, observed Huistan, keeping pretty equal pace on the opposite side. The scrutiny that instantly followed was not favourable to the shepherd: he looked tired and heated; that might be natural enough; but where was his plaid? where the colly dogs? There was an air of hurry and excitement about him, and his approach had been rapid and silent. The gaugers moved on, Huistan keeping up with them: but this would not do; he must gain advantage, or all would soon be lost. The Lodge lay but about two miles further on. He hailed the formidable party, and blithely asked them whence they were bound.

"Ye had better come on with us and see," was the reply.

"Na, na," Huistan replied, with a laugh (but inwardly saying, "God forgive me") "my walk lies na much farther, lads. Are ye gaeing up yon brae?" pointing to one of the hills in advance.

"It's not likely we are," growled the leader, glancing at Huistan askance.

"Weel, if no, I am! an' gin ye meet any o' my ewies on your side the water, I'd thank ye kindly to gie them a drive ower to me: gude day to ye, sirs."

And whistling carelessly, he shortly afterwards began the ascent of a hill, which led down in a totally different direction. He went climbing up until a gully in the rocks hid him from their view; then lying down amongst the brackens, he watched them proceed a considerable way, and gave wild yells while they were still in hearing, as if he were shouting after missing dogs or sheep.

The valets, Greaves and Thorold, were seated on a form in front of the lodge at Dreumah, enjoying the sunny afternoon with a tankard of ale, and mutually congratulating each other on their escape from the late hardships of the Dual Ghu; they having been sent home a few days in advance of their masters. Thorold was just declaring he felt that "an entire dislocation of his system" had taken place, when his words seemed likely to be verified; for, suddenly he and Greaves were dashed to the ground, and a great black-browed, strong-fisted Highlander held him struggling in his grip. It was Huistan who, dashing round the sharp angle of the wall, had thus violently disturbed their tête-à-tête.

"Ne'er mind a bit scart on ye're spindle shanks, man," he

gasped, as Thorold with a howl put his hand on his leg; "but tell me quick, are ye Mr. Marchmoram's heid flunkie? butler they ca' it: quick, quick, then; oot wi' the keys o' ye're wine cellar."

"Murder! murder! robbery!" shouted Thorold, writhing in the shepherd's brawny grasp.

"Ye're daft, ye cowardly loon!" cried Huistan, shaking him furiously. "Oh, man, search his pockets for the keys!" he exclaimed in an agony of impatience to Greaves; who, more collected, had risen to his feet. "Here I hae rin nigh nine mile to save ye're masters' names an' siller, an' a' will be lost unless ye mak speed; ye hae smuggled whisky in the cellar. Hiest ye! hiest ye! oot wi' it! I'll rin an' I'll dash it into Loch Nightach afore their faces." Relinquishing Thorold, he seized upon Greaves, and dragged him into the lodge, where almost mechanically, but, urged by Huistan's excitement, moving rapidly, Greaves drew out a key, and led the way to the cellar.

"The cask is much too heavy," he exclaimed with nervous trepidation.

"Na fear, na fear!" shouted Huistan, as with the strength of three men, he hoisted it upon his back, and balancing himself, set forward at a run. "There, they're coming, an' I daresay they'll cut ye're throat!" he cried, as he passed Thorold, propped against the wall. The sight of armed men approaching, the horror of Huistan's threat, quite overcame Thorold's shallow brain: but one idea presented itself to him—the massacre of Glencoe! Frantic with fear, he rushed into the Lodge; where, some hours later, he was discovered almost insensible beneath the mattress of his bed. Greaves followed Huistan. The excisemen were on the ridge of the nearest hill, and Huistan had reached the dog-kennel.

"We're safe! we're safe!" he exclaimed in ecstasy. "It's off the premises: they canna noo prove whar it came from. But I'll gie them some trouble to regain the stuff itself: I'll tempt them yet, a wee," and he staggered on towards the loch." With shouts of rage, the baffled excisemen charged headlong down.

"That cursed cunning shepherd! There's a hundred pounds gone! Never had they been more boldly and cleverly outwitted: by the time they had reached the water's edge, breathless and blown, Huistan had already thrown the prize into one of the deepest pools in the loch. The gaugers surrounded

him; but they were powerless to touch or harm him. There was no proof that the cask he had carried contained smuggled whisky; and even if it could be recovered, the loch must be drained ere they could swear that it, and no other, had been thrown in: and as for the English proprietor, he was safe from the moment that Huistan had borne it across the threshold of his dwelling.

"Hands off! hands off! honest men!" Huistan exclaimed, as they swarmed like wasps around him. "In ye're trade, ye maun just tak' things as ye find them; an' I canna on my conscience say, that I wish ye better luck next time."

Huistan went back with Greaves, and enjoyed a long deep draught of English ale; but, in spite of all the latter's urgent entreaties, he refused to give up his name.

"Never mind, never mind, my guid friend," he said, "I'm no in your part o' the country at a'; an' it's no like that ye'll ever see me again. It was jist a bit spree to me: an' nae more weight nor trouble than carrying a muckle ram on my back to the wool washing."

"But my master will never be satisfied with this," Greaves replied, disconcertedly. "He will require to know who gave the information, and will reward you handsomely."

"Weel, weel!" Huistan exclaimed excitedly. "Listen to me, Mr. Butler! Ye speak o' a reward. Tell your master the only reward I will tak', is this; that, for the sake o' the country's guid name, he will ne'er inquire a word more about the matter. Tell him I trust to his honour for this: it's my reward."

Without waiting for further reply, but nodding decisively to Greaves, Huistan turned on his heel; he reached Lochandhu by a long and circuitous route, which it would have been very difficult for any spy to have traced.

Three more days of cloudless weather at the Dual Ghu were wholly devoted to sport. Harold's injured hand being disabled for a gun, he fished every day with Norah and Ishbel; while Esmé sat on the rocks looking on. Harold and Norah likewise oft took a dreamy repose on the sunny banks of the river. The other gentlemen shot; and the game book, on the 30th of September, showed a fair head of deer, grouse, and mountain hares—the latter game shot, not from sport, but from duty. The tents were struck, the ponies saddled, the turf fires extinguished, and "Onward!" was the word.

The party returned by a different route from that by which

they came : they went direct through the chains of mountains, which formed double and treble amphitheatres around the scene, and were soon in a labyrinth of hill, bog, and water ; which, to a party left there without guides, would have proved nigh inextricable. In single file, and in zig-zag course, the riders proceeded ; the ponies often clambering along the edges of precipices, with gulfs of morass beside and beneath. The shepherd guides proceeded in advance, armed with long sticks, which they thrust every now and then into the treacherous moss ; and, with shrill cries in Gaelic, forbade or encouraged to advance, as they found the ground to be safe or not. The ponies showed equal sagacity : where the path was hard and rocky they scrambled in gay scampering style, tossing their uncombed manes, and neighing to the echoing hills ; but the moment their hoofs sank into the soft parts, they paced with slow and canny movement, with low bent head, sniffing uneasily the peaty surface before them. Solemn, vast, and grand, rose the heights of those gray old mountains. Not a blade of grass, not a leaf was to be seen ; scarce even the herbage of heather : nought but the gray and black of the frowning rocks ; or brown tracts of moss, and deep haunted-looking tarns, where the eagles stooped to drink. The solitude was awful, savagely-sublime, and overpowering in its sense of loneliness and desolation. No tongue could express the delightful feeling of relief, when, suddenly and quite unexpectedly, after hours of tedious riding, they emerged through a huge gray rocky ravine, and beheld the scenery of Glenbenrough spreading far beneath. They were yet miles off ; but the whole downward way lay exquisitely green in sylvan beauty : the natural woods spreading in clumps of various trees, from birch to ash, and the ground strewn with the feathery birch, scented bog myrtle, and heather in all its varied blooms of purple. The very hills now assumed an altered aspect, being covered with glorious beauty as well as grandeur ; their sides gemmed with sparkling torrents that relieved the varied shades of light and colour : the redness of the Roua Pass was clearly distinguishable, as the sun made its ruddy hue glow with light.

They reached Glenbenrough on Saturday evening, and it was arranged that the gentlemen should remain there, and return to Dreumah on Monday. Sunday was a day of delightful rest ; and as the girls were a little fatigued by the long ride home, their father absolved them from the customary walk to church : they had prayers instead, in the garden on the river

bank. Ishbel proposed that every one should learn a short paraphrase: they did so; and each repeated his or her task aloud, with gravity and decorum.

During those last few days at the Dual Ghu, Auber had repeatedly sought to have moments alone with Esmé; but always unsuccessfully: whether by design or from the result of circumstances did not appear. Esmé felt that Marchmoram's eye was upon her, and that he perceived the secret desire of Auber; for no outward manifestation of it was suffered to escape. But Marchmoram interfered not, either by word or look: indeed, Esmé even thought he sometimes seemed to abet Auber; for if he was the obstacle to a *tête-à-tête*, he instantly retired; and once or twice when she was thrown in his own way, he even turned abruptly from her. The gentlemen went to Dreumah on Monday, and Normal also returned to Arduashien that day.

October had advanced to its 9th day. A week had been passed at Glenbenrough—a quiet, resting week; and it was required, for stirring days were coming. On the morning of the 9th, Glenbenrough and Norah received two notes by the post bag. One was from Mr. Auber, announcing his sudden departure for London, and requesting leave to call on his way to make his adieux. The other was from Lady Mac Neil, to Norah, inviting Glenbenrough, his daughters and their friends to stay a fortnight at Strathshielie; thence to go to a grand ball at Couchfern.

Lady Mac Neil's invitation having been expected some time was at once accepted, and Norah wrote, fixing their going on Tuesday, four days hence. Glenbenrough made some comments on this sudden departure of Mr. Auber, regretting it as the first break in the Dreumah party; and then told Esmé to go and order a room to be prepared for Auber that night, as he could get to Braemorin in plenty of time for the mail, by starting early next morning. Esmé did as she had been desired, and then went to the garden, pulled some autumn flowers and scarlet berries, which she arranged in a bouquet, and put on the toilet-table of Auber's room: she then again went out, and climbed up the Rona Pass and sat down. An hour later, she saw Auber and Harold on the bridge, driving from Dreumah, the luggage piled on the dog-cart, and the valet sitting beside it. They drove up to the house, and Glenbenrough came out to welcome them. Esmé slid behind a rock and sat motionless; the rim of her hat only was visible, and it so blended in the covert of

yellow fading ferns, that at that distance she was quite indistinguishable. She saw Norah and Ishbel and the two gentlemen, by-and-by, appear at the hall door; they wandered through the garden and went down to the river bank; and as Esmé looked down from her eyrie, a sunshiny smile lightened her eye, as it caught the radiance on Norah's happy face. A sigh escaped Esmé, as she saw Auber's dark eye seeking hither and thither. She did not meet Auber until a few moments before dinner in the drawing-room. The dinner was a merry one as usual; and, in so small a party, conversation was familiar and general. Auber repeatedly lamented the hardship of his sudden call to London; but it was on business, to which the law imperatively commanded his presence and attention. Go he must, he said. When they entered the drawing-room after dinner, Norah sat down to the piano, and Esmé took a book and went to her own room; but she did not read: with restless foot she paced up and down, her hand twisted through her long waving hair—her usual habit when giving herself up to her fast-flitting fancies. After a time, she heard Ishbel's voice calling her name, and then she thought she heard steps on the gravel; they had all gone out to enjoy the calm twilight. She entered the drawing-room, which seemed empty, and ran to the open window and looked out to see if they were in sight; a step on the carpet made her turn her head, and her eyes met the gaze of Auber: he might have seen the beating of her bosom beneath the white muslin folds, and the quiver of her lip, as she found herself alone with him.

There was a mutual silence for a moment or two, and then Auber, drawing close to her, asked,

"Where were you to-day when I arrived? and all that time before dinner?"

"On the Roua Pass, Mr. Auber," was Esmé's reply; a nervous blush passing over her face.

"And you knew I was here—and that it was for the last time! Esmé, don't avoid me. Listen! Esmé: such intercourse as ours has been must stamp its own character on your mind, and *will* have place in your memory; and, unless you hear me fully to-night, that memory will be sadly restless. To say that you are the dearest, most lovable little creature I ever knew—that you have entwined around a deep-worn heart a memory of yourself which I dare not disentangle, is not enough to express what I feel. You are mine, Esmé! In the *desire of love*, you are mine. Esmé, I will return next year;

I trust that you will not forget me. You *will not* forget me. Give me a tress of your hair as a binding tie: it will charm; its golden light will shine upon past hours, and brightness on the future. Now let me cut it off: and you will not forget me!"

He drew her hand in his, as she leant back apart from in the darkening recess of the window, and lifted up the waving curls that drooped on her shoulder. She put the hand which touched her hair, but allowed him no other to retain her hand, which he had taken, while she said:

"Mr. Auber, there is no reality in this. You do not thus. To you I have been but as the companion of a sad day; and now it is nearly over."

She spoke in a low, faltering voice; and her gaze, which softly but steadily upon his face, was sadly mournful in expression. Auber saw no deeper than the look. Her startled him in their simple significance and truth: but this look of grief! It was for him. That look, associated with her words, changed their tenor, and he interpreted to imply a doubting, trembling love: he believed she loved. That she must do so, and would discover it (if she knew yet) after he had left, he had little doubted; but he knew now, for he saw it: that low-breathed sigh, that regretful and the tearful eyes full of sympathy, told the practised him who met it, that Esmé loved.

She did love: but *he* knew not whom.

Could he have but seen a little deeper, he would have discovered that her words expressed her discernment of the torineness of his feeling, and that she had thus saved herself from bartering her soul for nought: he would have discovered the shadowy look of grief was associated with another, whose name even then hung silently on her lips—one who never spoken of love as Auber had done, but who yet had won her. Auber threw a passionate tenderness into his voice again spoke. He was not altogether deceitful; but he was not truthful,—it was but a soft sentimental fondness could not be otherwise; all generous and impassioned love had been extinguished in him. What he now did, bore the odour of guilt; in that he sought to gain her affections in utter selfishness; demanding a pledge without giving any.

"Esmé, I love you! I take your memory with me, leave you my heart. Give me a binding tress of your hair,"
pleaded Auber.

Again she replied with strange distinctness ; but the expression of her saddened face still belied the truth of her words to him.

"No, Mr. Auber, I cannot give you a lock of my hair. You do not leave your heart with me. But you may sometimes think of me ; and that I will remember you, you must well know."

"We do not part thus," he had just time to whisper, as Ishbel came bounding up the stairs, followed by the rest of the party, who had all returned in raptures from viewing a beautiful lunar rainbow which had spanned the hills. During the evening there were rather frequent inquiries on Harold's part as to the exact date of their visit to Strathshielie, and the expected ball at Couchfern ; followed by a rather depressed expression of his countenance, which, however, cleared up as Ishbel remarked,

"You are sure to be asked too, Mr. Harold ; and then you will come to Strathshielie."

"Oh ! but they don't know us at Couchfern."

"But they know of you : that is enough in the Highlands."

Then Harold would give a satisfied smile, and Ishbel a skip of delight. Glenbenrough invited Harold to remain all night, in order to try the trout in the river next day ; to which he agreed. The whole party were up early next morning to bid adieu to Mr. Auber. It was a bright autumnal day : his luggage was being arranged upon the dog-cart, and they all stood at the hall door to see him start. He audibly asked Esmé to show him where the deer's-grass grew upon the Roua Pass, as he wished to take a parting piece to England with him ; so she went to the hill with him ; but the others did not follow.

"Esmé, you will not let me go without a tress of hair ?"

"No, Mr. Auber ; I cannot give it to you : I told you so before."

"Cruel girl ! I do not believe it : you will send it to me. Esmé, I dare not write to you, for that would not be pleasing to your father ; but you may write to me : write to me sometimes, Esmé ; will you ?" He bent anxiously towards her.

"No, Mr. Auber," Esmé replied, with grave downcast look ; "I will not write to you."

"Well, think of me, then," he pleaded, with more eagerness of voice and look than she had ever seen in him before. Her coldness chafed and excited him ; he would have had her more *demonstrative of his influence*.

"Esmé, promise me you will not marry until you see me again: not until next year."

One of her old smiles broke forth, and her face looked bright in its sunny youth, as she replied,

"I can promise that."

"Then I need say no more. I believe you will not forget me, for you *could* not, Esmé."

"You are right; I never shall forget you, Mr. Auber: but I have been kept from——" she hesitated, and the concluding words faltered inaudibly from her lips. They were already amongst the birch-trees at the foot of the hill, returning, and but a few moments remained ere they should reach the others, who were still standing in front of the house. Auber spoke low and rapidly, detaining her by her hand.

"I will return: remember! You may sometimes see my name in the London papers. I may go abroad; but when I do, think of this, that whether in England or on the Continent,—amidst every phase of woman's beauty—but one face will be before me: those deep blue eyes, and the face that I——loved at the water-lily loch." He bent down, and suddenly impressing a burning kiss upon her cheek, was gone.

Esmé stood still amongst the birch-trees. She was not missed; for the moment that Auber drove off, Norah, Ishbel, and Mr. Harold descended to the river banks, with their fishing-rods; and Esmé went in the opposite direction. She threw herself upon the heather, beneath the shadow of the rocks, and reclined there in luxurious loneliness. She lay quiet beneath a glowing sun, and the echo of a tender voice murmured in her ear. Yes, he had a power over her: he must have had. That volatile fancy, romance, or what you will—which was an idiosyncrasy of Esmé—answered to the charm of Auber's thoughts, voice, and manner; but there were depths in her nature which would have required the passion of a noble heart like Marchmoram's to stir: she felt this was wanting in Auber. Marchmoram was the true steel, which, with magnetic force, drew her irresistibly towards himself. Had he been absent, Auber might have led her on with his bewildering fascinations; but as it was, her heart was safe from him: her reason opposed him, and her inclination was towards another.

CHAPTER XV.

THE BALL AT COUCHFERN—LADY IDA.

The ladies glided through the ha'
 Wi' footing swift and sure;
 But the Highland girl outdid them a'
 When she stood upon the floor.—SCOTT.

I had leaned my head upon his breast,
 And yet I had wept—I knew not why.
 Oh! but my heart was ill at rest:
 I could not hold nor bid him stay.—HOEG.

THERE were gay doings at Strathshielie. The house was full as only a Highland house can be filled: guests were placed in every available nook; sofas and arm-chairs were converted into beds; and Marchmoram's valet, Greaves, was asked to sleep on the top of the mangle in the laundry, which he indignantly refused to do.

A large circle, nearly all intimate friends, was assembled in the drawing-room before dinner, the day previous to the ball at Couchfern; Harold, Marchmoram, and Sir Henry and Lady Lauriston, being the only strangers present: though the latter lady did not consider herself one; she was delighted to find herself again in old Scotland, after many years' absence, and was ready to regard with the most lenient judgment all native peculiarities. Sir Henry Lauriston was a slight fair man, very gentlemanly and amiable, always ready, with a smile and short nervous stutter, to agree to everything his wife proposed. He was in the happiest imaginable state of thralldom, being as utterly unconscious of it as his wife seemed to be. Harold, who was now talking to the lady, thought what an admirable wife a Scotchwoman made. Lady Lauriston was a pretty woman, with a quiet, kindly energy of manner; and though rather delicate naturally, yet, with that spirit of endurance which the Scotch possess, she rarely succumbed to it. When the piper set up a preliminary screech on the bagpipes, ere commencing his customary musical parade round the dinner-table, Sir Henry would contract his brow for a moment, and then relax into equanimity, as a bright glance from his wife told him he ought to think it "very nice." Indeed, she commanded his feelings in every way.

The other guests at Strathshielie were Sir Roderick and

Lady Mackenzie of Glenmardie ; Mr. and Mrs. Grant of Seatoun, and their only son ; two rather antiquated Miss Mac Gregors, cousins of the family, very poor, proud, and thin ; Lady Fraser of Forran, a kind, rich old widow ; young Campbell of Breesah ; Normal of Arduashien, and one or two supplementary young ladies and bachelors. Marchmoram and Harold had arrived at Strathshielie to accompany the party next day to Couchfern, where Mr. and Mrs. Stuart Mac Leod were to give a ball, in honour of the return of their eldest son from a prolonged tour abroad. Young Couchfern was a popular man, strong and handsome like a young eagle, his sporting exploits and noble spirit won the admiration of both men and women : in both him and Campbell of Breesah, the volatile element of the Celtic blood showed itself ; they enjoyed shooting all day, and dancing all night, as is the fashion in the Highlands ; and relished a bottle of claret, or a nocturnal escapade, with equal zest : but Couchfern's joviality flashed openly in his bright dark eyes and wicked smile, while Breesah showed his in the covert expression of his twinkling blue eyes. Young Seatoun, who was at Strathshielie, partook more of Normal Mac Alastair's character : he was rather shy and reserved, but observing, and had a keen sense of the ludicrous : he noted, with quiet amusement, the droll contrast in appearance and character of Sir Roderick and Lady Glenmardie, who now joined the circle ; and even of his own father and mother, as they entered a little later. Lady Glenmardie was a vast, broad-shouldered, raw-boned woman, with implacable gray eyes, and a long thin mouth ; she was attired in black velvet, and sparkled with jewels. She spoke in loud masculine tones ; and in her younger days she had driven tandem on the most dangerous roads in the Highlands, boasting of having used her whip on more horses—and men—than any other woman in Scotland : indeed, whenever she dared, she still wielded the lash of her tongue as well as her thong. Sir Roderick, who was almost concealed amidst the voluminous folds of his wife's gown, emerged a small, thin, wizened man, with a weak treble voice and trembling little chuckle, dressed in the shrunken uniform of a deputy-lieutenant (an appointment held more by her than by him) : he whispered to Lady Mac Neil that he was wearing a pair of his wife's boots, as she, in superintending the packing of his wardrobe, had forgotten that part of it. Lady Glenmardie overheard this confidential remark, and instantly commented on it in a tone that resounded through the room.

"Forget your boots, Sir Roderick! No; but you chose to wear out your others so extravagantly, that I told you I would not order another pair until the 6th of next month: recollect, the 6th of next month!" and she gave an appealing laugh of triumph to the company. Poor Sir Roderick endeavoured to respond by a feeble chuckle, which waxed fainter as she continued: "And see you don't dance to-morrow night. I won't have mine cracked, I assure you."

"That would na be very likely," Sir Roderick ventured to mutter, as he looked down upon a boot an inch longer than his foot.

Mr. and Mrs. Grant of Seatoun were a study for a week. He was a tall, stolid Highlander, with a big head of bushy red hair, and thick shaggy eyebrows; and his rusty-looking clothes hung loosely upon him. He was taciturn, slow, and cautious, and assiduously devoted in his attentions to his snuff-mull, from which he frequently refreshed himself with immense pinches of snuff. His wife was a surprising old lady; very short and stout, her fat little hands covered with rings, and her large, coarse features surrounded by a profusion of tinsel ornaments and wonderful inventions of her own in blonde and gaudy ribands. Her estimate of her personal attractions was second only to that of her intellectual: the former she considered dangerous to any man's peace; but by the latter she believed she could take him prisoner at will: for she prided herself prodigiously on her conversational powers, and she fawned and flattered, courted and cringed; wherever she saw an opportunity of gratifying her vanity by displaying "her parts of speech," and to gain an invitation, all her small stock of worldly tact was exerted.

The first evening there was dancing of reels, and Sir Roger de Coverley, to the alternate music of pipes and piano, with round games and *les jeux innocens*, until all hours in the morning. Next day there was a large *battue*; and soon after dinner the ladies all retired to the duties of a ball-room toilette. Six or seven carriages full left Strathshiellie for the Couchfern ball. In the first drove Lady Mac Neil, Lady Lauriston, Julia and Norah; Sir Alastair sitting on the box, his evening costume concealed by a huge tartan plaid, and his good-humoured face buried in the folds, in order that the night air might not cause his appearance with too clarety a complexion. The second carriage conveyed Glenbenrough, Esmé, Ishbel, and Mr. Marchmoram. It was a fine moonlight night, and the

road lay through wild scenery all the way. Couchfern being built on a height, was approached by a long steep ascent ; and, as they came in view of it, the danger of the route was fully revealed by the glare of blazing bonfires flaming on all the surrounding hills ; a low parapet, in many places quite crumbled away, being the only protection against the frightful edge of the precipice along which the ascent lay. Glenbenrough here got out of the carriage to walk up ; but Marchmoram sat still with the girls, and as Ishbel gazed out of the window, he spoke a few hurried words to Esmé in an under tone.

"Do you intend to be merry to-night, Esmé?"

"Yes, Mr. Marchmoram, I think so ;" and she gave one of her arch smiles.

"Are you not fancying how another is spending this night ? Would you not like to know ?"

Esmé shook her head slightly, and turned her face away.

"I can tell you, partly. A pair of large dark eyes are seeking for his ; but he would rather have the blue ones. He believes they are tearful in his absence."

"Mr. Marchmoram," she replied, in a low firm voice, looking directly at him, "I care not meet Mr. Auber again."

A flashing glance of his eye passed, and a momentary relaxation of his stern features revealed his delight ; as in low, deep tones he whispered, "Esmé, my own !" Her fair downcast face blushed and paled alternately beneath the searching gaze and burning light of those dilated orbs. At that moment Esmé felt that she could have died for him.

The ball-room at Couchfern presented a striking scene ; the old hall of the castellated edifice, decorated with every conceivable variety of Highland trophy, was brilliantly lighted, and filled with a numerous assemblage of Highland gentry (some of whom had come from a distance of forty miles), displaying nearly every combination of tartan colours, in kilts and ladies' ribands. A guard of kilted men, holding flaming torches of pine wood, lighted the entrance from without. Dancing had progressed for some time ere the arrival of the large Strathshielie party ; but the moment they entered, the Miss Mac Neils were in request. Never had Esmé looked more lovely ; she was dressed (as were her sisters) in white silk, with bouquets of scarlet geranium, green leaves and flowers of which were also intermingled in the waving gold of her hair. Marchmoram, who was seated, followed her movements as she danced, and his eyes were so riveted on her that he attracted

the observation of Normal Mac Alastair. The night had somewhat advanced ere Marchmoram again approached Esmé; and then, after dancing, he retained her hand and led her through the cooler ante-rooms; they sat and talked a long while in the entrance hall, which was, on this occasion, reserved for the company. A sense of intense happiness pervaded Esmé's being. Marchmoram's voice was subdued to the thrilling softness of Auber's, and a passionate fire burned in his deep clear eyes as he spoke: he did not utter words of love, but his looks spoke fervidly: and Esmé inwardly felt that but a slight barrier prevented the flood of passion from bursting forth. Upwards of an hour passed thus; it was an eventful period in the hidden life of Esmé.

As Marchmoram sat with her near the door, a slight movement attracted their attention, and presently a group of ladies entered.

"These are the Thistlebanks," said Esmé; "they are fashionably late."

There were three tall, showy-looking girls, evidently sisters; with high colours and consequential manners; the last the result of a past season in London. Aided by the romance of a Scotch property, a bold assertion of Scotch lineage (which might gain credence in the one country, though quite untenable in the other), and an imposing entrance into society, not unlike the manner of their present entrance, they had made a way for themselves. One of the proofs of their success was present in the person of a fourth lady, who entered with them; she was one of London's rarest flowers, and more prized on that account than for her beauty. Esmé's eye impatiently swept past the garish, defiant tulip beauties, to rest upon this still more haughty damsel; and while a smile of contempt passed over the lip of the Highland girl, as her foolish countrywomen played off their silly airs and graces, her eye fell coldly and steadfastly on the marked in-born pride of the lofty high-bred Englishwoman. The English lady was tall, thin, and of a clear dark complexion; her eyes, small, bright, and scintillant, but not restless, darted penetrating glances from beneath a low Greek brow. Her hair, of ebon black, was arranged in admirable taste; she wore white silk, and upon her head a wreath of natural oak leaves. The countenance was clever, commanding, and determined; but it was a face that had *ne'er been softened by a touch of sentiment, or warmed by the glow of passion: it told of natural ability and strong buoyant*

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life, without a particle of heart affection, and showed a mind thoroughly imbued with calm pride and dignity.

After some moments' survey of the stranger, Esmé exclaimed,

"Mr. Marchmoram, what a very striking person that is with the Thistlebanks ! who can she be ?"

He did not reply : what change had come over him ? His lip quivered and was compressed, and a paleness spread over his face, and he seemed restless. Without answering, he moved away. Esmé turned to young Couchfern, who was near, and repeated her query anxiously.

"Oh, that is Lady Ida Beauregard, the Duke of Brittonberg's daughter. You must have heard of her ; she is a cousin of Harold's : there, he is going up to her."

A paleness, deeper than that of Marchmoram's now passed over Esmé's face. She heard Lady Ida speak to Harold in a voice deep, clear, and ringing.

"Why, Basil, I seem to have come down like an *aérolite* upon you : I never saw any one more astonished !"

"I had no idea you were in the country, Ida."

"Well, you see I am ; and I shall expect you to escort me out of it very shortly : you must be quite tired of grouse shooting by this time." She slightly lowered her voice, "You are surprised at seeing me so far north ? a little political sacrifice to please papa. A short visit to Thistlebank will give him—what I must not mention here. We agreed to pay a week's visit, and he is laid up with gout : I am dreadfully bored there, Basil. You must dance with the Miss Thistlebanks—Miss Rankins, I mean."

Then, with perfect grace, she turned to the eldest Miss Rankin of Thistlebank, and, with great *empresement* of manner, introduced Harold. She conversed for a few moments with the other sisters in a lively, easy manner, conveying that idea of friendly intimacy so pleasing to the person addressed, and then moved on to greet an English friend, the Lady Jane Trevor, who was seated by Lady Macdermot Mac Lean. Esmé observed that, either by intuitive perception, or from a significant side glance of Lady Jane, the amiable weaknesses of Lady Mac Lean were at once discovered by Lady Ida, and that the two friends amused themselves for a considerable time at the poor woman's expense. Lady Macdermot Mac Lean was the daughter of a retired Scotch lawyer, and being newly raised to the dignity of a title by marriage with an old baronet of ancient

family and landed estate, she was in a state of plebeian embarrassment as to whom, amongst her former acquaintance, she should bow. The wife of the parish doctor (who had often clothed and fed her, for love, as a child) of course she must cut; nor did she deign to recognize a tribe of vulgar Edinburgh cousins, who, in their ignorance, had looked forward with delight to meeting her on that occasion; on others she bestowed strangled courtesies, or withered smiles, with painful mental misgivings as to the exact proportion of each. Her cross, red face, lanky, ungainly figure, and uneasy vanity, made her pitiful in her meanness; for she contrived to hurt some honest hearts there.

Lady Ida joined in one or two quadrilles, and moved from room to room with dignified ease; her manner gave Esmé the idea of a consummate social diplomate, as it varied constantly in minute indications, yet was characterised by uniform suavity, politeness, and polished address. Though haughty, reserved, and cold, Lady Ida's blandishments ingratiated wherever they were displayed; yet there was an air of dissatisfaction and a look of weariness on the finely-chiselled features; not a ray of genius or sympathy beamed in Lady Ida's cold and blank eye, as, for some time, she sat alone: in a word, she was *ennuyée*.

Esmé had lost sight of Marchmoram when he left her so abruptly; but her eyes had followed Lady Ida, and, consequently, now took in a tableau in which he also played an interested part. Normal Mac Alastair was walking slowly past with a slightly sullen cloud upon his brow, and a downcast look; but with dreamy, shaded glances of his wild hazel-blue eye, taking in all the surrounding scene: there might be some dissatisfaction, and a tinge of youthful cynicism, in the absent look; but that was superficial. As he advanced, his gaze suddenly encountered the Lady Ida's; she hesitated for a moment—a flush of indefinable expression passed over her proud, pale features—then, with a slight quick gesture, she bowed, approached, and took his hand. Normal stood with his back to Esmé, but seemed to reply and meet with ease the gracious *empressment* and fascination now apparent in Lady Ida's manner. Assuredly that was no first introduction: Esmé read aright in Lady Ida's polished frankness only the natural expression of gratitude in the woman whose life he had saved; for Normal had told her, when at the Dual Ghru, of his *combat with Angus N'Ort*; though, for proud reasons of his own, had forbade her to mention it to the Englishmen. A still

deeper sympathy drew her back to Marchmoram, who was not many paces from her; but he thought not then of Esmé: his gaze was excitedly fixed on Normal, thus in conversation with his countrywoman. Extreme surprise, uneasiness, and displeasure were strongly expressed in his look: he was puzzled: how could this young Highlander have excited an interest in Lady Ida? Esmé turned her head away, and when she looked again Normal had moved off, and Marchmoram had succeeded him. The manner of Lady Ida now appeared to Esmé more haughty than she had yet seen it: with curved lip, and head erect, Lady Ida stood as if there were no intimacy betwixt them. Marchmoram was studiously attentive, but cold and distant in his politeness. Lady Ida dropped her bracelet, both stooped, and their foreheads momentarily touched each other. Esmé observed Marchmoram profuse in apology; but no smile passed over either his or her lip, as might naturally happen at such a little awkwardness: they were evidently but distant acquaintances. A quadrille was forming, Esmé saw Marchmoram ask Lady Ida to dance, and they joined it; he was absent and grave, and only a few commonplace words were exchanged. Lady Ida moved with a stately tread and a look of indifference, scarcely touching the hand of her *vis-à-vis*, and coldly isolating herself from the dancers around. The quadrille over, Marchmoram led Lady Ida back to her seat, stood beside her with formal politeness, and they conversed for some time. Lady Jane Trevor then came up, and after some lively talking with her, Marchmoram withdrew, and disappeared in the crowd.

A ball in the Highlands is very different from one in any other locality: perhaps as an enjoyment, coming seldom, people determine to make the most of it; or it may be that the associations of pipes and tartan rouse up Celtic enthusiasm: I rather think it is the latter reason. Certainly no enjoyment could have been more energetic than that of this night: reel followed reel, and even the ladies encouraged each other to keep it up with spirit, by whispered exhortations, as they whirled each other round, of "Caberfeidh for ever, Jeanie!" "Mary, don't say you are tired before the Frasers!" When the ball broke up, the scene of confusion that followed was even more boisterous than the previous hilarity. To have found a coachman sober would have been almost a reflection on the hospitality of the house; and many of their masters had taken such parting draughts of champagne, that the ladies were all anxious to hurry into their carriages, lest feuds should

arise. Scarcely one of the Strathshielie party went back as they had come. Esmé and Ishbel got a glimpse of Norah hurried away between their father and Harold, as they clambered into a carriage where sat Mrs. Grant of Seatoune, her corpulent proportions occupying the whole front seat. She affected to be very timorous, and faintly called to the coachman to drive steadily; then she sank back, closed her eyes, and kept waving a fan before her face. The coachman gave a nod when he received his order, but followed it by such a succession of nods that Esmé at once saw his head was not answerable for the movement; and so "steady" was his driving, that the horses scarce went at walking pace; they had it all their own way. They were just approaching the descent—a fearful one it was to trust to the sagacity of a drunken driver—and Esmé was about proposing their getting out and walking down, when Sir Henry Lauriston's mail phaeton, with two gentlemen, passed them rapidly. Mrs. Grant opened her eyes and gave a small scream of surprise, for effect; this so startled the coachman, that with awakened vigour he lashed the horses, and on they rattled at a hard broken trot down the descent, which grew momentarily steeper; the carriage increasing in its impetus, and swaying frightfully from side to side, as they approached a sharp turn, where the parapet was, of course, wanting. The bank here shelved almost precipitously, only broken here and there by a scattered rock or tree; a deep burn ran gurgling beneath, and the moon lit up distinctly the approaching danger. Mrs. Grant with a shriek of real terror called out "Stop!" the coachman jerked the reins, and the horses began to back; the wheels ground against the low crumbled parapet, and the coachman, in his drunken blindness, pulled them on to the edge. The danger was imminent: but it did not last long; for Mrs. Grant's shrill shrieks were heard above the plunging of the horses, and, amidst the discordant cries of mistress and servant, Esmé recognized a well-known voice. Leaning from the window, while Ishbel held the door open ready for a spring, she saw Marchmoram seize the horses, with an iron grasp, and endeavour to drag them onward from the edge; his strong clear voice resounding above the din, in shouts to the coachman to slacken the reins, and urge the horses forward with the whip. But it was too late: the horses reared up together, and Esmé gave a piercing scream as *she saw Marchmoram for a moment carried off his feet. His grasp was upon the mane of one horse and the bridle of the*

other, and with determined purpose he pulled down their heads, and urged them on a few paces. The struggle was now over: they backed again, infuriated by resistance, while the drunken driver kept sawing at the reins, and helped them to their fate. Marchmoram let go only in time to save himself, and spring to the carriage door, as the wheels locked on the top of the parapet. Ishbel was already out; but Esmé was within, and the doorway was blocked up by the unwieldy form of Mrs. Grant, now fainting with terror: Marchmoram dragged her out and almost threw her down, and then seized the white dress of Esme; the carriage was tottering over as she clung to his arms, and her foot had scarcely touched the ground when carriage, horses, and coachman rolled over, and went headlong down the precipice.

With hands twined round the neck of Marchmoram, Esmé clung to him, and sobbed out, "Oh! Godfrey Marchmoram!" A deadly pallor was over her face; for she had a narrow escape from death. He only whispered as he held her close, "You are safe, dear one: don't be frightened, Esmé, my darling."

He sat upon the bank and held her in his arms, her head against his breast, and whispered words of love and reassurance, while she clasped his hands and sobbed,

"Oh, Godfrey, I am glad it is you who have saved me."

Sir Henry Lauriston's mail phaeton had been drawn up, at the moment that Marchmoram had sprung from it; but Sir Henry could not leave it, as his horses would not have stood alone. A post-chaise with the Glenmardies now appeared in sight; and, at its approach, some gentlemen who were in it, with Sir Ro - k and his lady, descended and came up to the scene of the accident: they went down the bank; but Marchmoram did not leave Esmé. The carriage lay a mass of splinters; one of the horses was already dead, and the moans of the other were so dreadful that Normal Mac Alastair, who had come up, drew his dirk and put it out of pain. The coachman, through that proverbial luck which so oft attends the drunken, was unhurt, save a few slight bruises. Poor Mrs. Grant presented a melancholy spectacle, as they hoisted her into the post-chaise: her wig, with all its paraphernalia, had dropped off and been swept away by the wind; but in the flutter of agitation and her attempts at engrossing the *attentions of the gentlemen*, she did not miss it, and rolled her eyes and fanned herself as if still in all her pristine glory. Ishbel got up beside Sir Henry Lauriston, and Normal, having given his

place : the Glenmardie vehicle to Mrs. Grant, took a seat in the first phaeton beside her. Marchmoram lifted Esmé into the back seat, and sat beside her ; his arms were around her, and she leant her head upon his broad chest : her eyes were half closed as, in thrilling, low breathed murmurs, she half unconsciously repeated his name.

"Esmé," he whispered in tones of passionate tenderness, "you once said I did not know your heart : oh ! could you know mine. Esmé, child, I love you : oh ! why wert thou not destined to cross my path before this other fatal passion gained ascendancy over me ?"

She started, and trembled like a leaf within his grasp : he held her more firmly.

"Think not it is any rival passion for a woman, Esmé !" and a bitter smile crossed his lip. "No ; I never have loved woman as now I love you ! 'tis another worship which has gained such power over me. Oh, Esmé, had I but known you ere this !"

In a low, firm voice she whispered, "Let me reign with it."

"No, that could not be," and a spasm shot across his agitated countenance. "Esmé, you know not what I mean. Years ago my choice was made, and my soul given up to one master passion : all my energies were vowed to it ; all dreams of love foresworn, and one woman chosen as helpmate ; and she a woman of iron will, and worldly policy. Esmé, child," he continued, speaking rapidly, "believe only this ; you are my only love, my dearest treasure ! But you have raised civil war in my soul."

"Say not so," she replied, in low gentle tones, raising her eyes to his with tearful earnestness : "turn not against yourself, Godfrey. May I not love you ? If you love me, 'tis all I wish : I would not go with you ; but think of me thus : when wearied with the toil and hurry of ambitious life, remember there is a heart in the far-off Highlands, content alone in its love and remembrance of you."

Ishbel, seated by Normal, had kept silence during that moonlight drive. A strange history had discovered itself : she knew Esmé's secret now. Esmé loved Marchmoram, and she had seen how he loved Esmé. But what a strange, changeable man : Ishbel had never thought of him as loving or beloved : he was merely Mr. Marchmoram, the head, the king of them, whom every one must more or less study and obey. Amber had been Esmé's lover ; and Ishbel's heart had often beat

anxiously for her, for she never could feel quite sure of Auber : he was a different man from Harold. But Mr. Marchmoram ! she felt stunned by the discovery. Esmé slept in a small ante-room, opening upon the garden, and on their arrival Ishbel followed her into it. Neither spoke for a few moments ; then Ishbel approached Esmé and said,

" Oh, Esmé ! you know I saw your agitation : my darling sister, tell me what it is. He loves you."

" Don't speak to me, Ishbel dearest ; only let me know I have your secret sympathy : I could not speak to you about it. Wait until the winter months ; I may tell you then."

And so they parted ; and Ishbel kept Esmé's secret : the two sisters were alone in each other's confidence.

The breakfast party next morning was a large and noisy one ; the only serious subject being the upset of the evening before. This was rendered serio-comic by Mrs. Grant, who monopolised the subject, and excited the risible faculties of all the young men present by her crazy egotism : she made herself sole heroine of the accident, and spoke throughout in the first person. So completely had she rendered her oblivious of every one else, that she seemed totally to forget that there had been risk to any one else ; and she bridled and blushed as she described how Marchmoram had rushed to her assistance, and the efforts he had made in her behalf.

Harold and Marchmoram were this day to return to Dreumah. Esmé came in late to breakfast, and the only vacant place was one next Marchmoram. He sat in silence ; but as they rose, he whispered,

" Go to the garden, dear one."

Esmé went to her own room, took a little trinket from her desk, and then passed into the garden, where Marchmoram was pacing up and down the grassy middle walk. He led her up to a shady laurel copse, where even the birds were silent, and on the roots of a fallen tree they sat them down, her hand in his, and his low, masculine voice alone breaking the silence.

As he spoke, he often crushed the little fingers in his grasp.

" Esmé, the words of last night were not passing ones : I go forth to struggle. The result is uncertain, and your victory will not be light. You have to conquer, not me, but that within me to which I was subjugated. I tell you, child, you can scarcely understand the man who speaks to you : no woman will ever have wrested higher triumph from man than you, if you win me back from the race I had entered upon. Ambition

is the very life-blood of my soul. Can you understand the struggle of a strong and resolute nature against itself? Esmé, you are my choice, but I am vowed to another: meantime, try and forget me."

Esmé cast a reproachful look upon him.

"Yes, Esmé, try and forget me; and if I fail, hate me."

"Never!" she murmured. Then with that tearful gaze, which had lighted on Auber and misled him, she said earnestly, "Oh! Mr. Marchmoram, turn not against yourself. If I am not strong enough, let me quit your path: I told you last night my love would be content in its remembrance and in yours. I could give you no help but by my spirit; and it will ever go with you." Her colour flushed to a crimson glow, as with impassioned energy she continued, "It cannot be fettered; it could not mar you: it will go, and it will follow you where others turn back."

As she ceased, Marchmoram buried his face in his hands for a few moments; then he looked up with his sternest, darkest look.

"Esmé, we must say good-bye."

She put into his hand the trinket which she had taken out of her desk: it was an antique little seal,—a crescent moon cut on lapis lazuli, with the word "Gradatim" engraved above.

"Take this," she said, "and keep it for my sake. I have had it since I was a child: it belonged to a Countess Esmé a hundred years ago; the motto always suited me. Mr. Marchmoram, I am not going to be restless any more." And she closed his hand upon it, with a soft, sad smile.

He clasped his arms round her, in one long parting embrace, exclaiming,

"Esmé, Esmé, so help me Heaven, I will not lose you!"

She tore herself from him, and rushed to the solitude of her room. Marchmoram arose and drew his hat over his eyes; which gleamed haggardly, as he paced several times up and down the silent grassy walk; then, turning abruptly, he hurried into the house. Half-an-hour later, he and Harold were on their way back to Dreumah. No one saw Esmé that day until dinner-time. Norah twice knocked at her door, which was fastened, and, receiving no answer, fancied she had gone on some solitary ramble to the hills or woods. *Ishbel did not once go near Esmé's room.*

CHAPTER XVI.

ENTANGLEMENTS.

My bonny lassie hies away !—GILFILLAN.

I ken ye're thinkin
A certain bardie's rantin, drinkin,
Some luckless hour will send him linkin
To your black pit;
But, faith ! he'll turn a corner jinkin,
And cheat you yet.—BURNS.

A WEEK flew round at Strathshielie. They were no slaves to time there : hours commingled wonderfully ; late breakfasts and luncheons merged into dinner ; after which, the older lairds grew prosy over punch and claret, and their sapient discourse on sport and county business became somewhat overclouded. The young men sought the drawing-room, where the piper nightly introduced himself, and dancing and round games were kept up until the ladies were exhausted, when the smoking-room received the stronger men. Sir Henry and Lady Lauriston were the first to talk of leaving : a long journey was before them, and if they stayed much later in the season, there would be difficulty in procuring post-horses on the Highland road. It had been arranged that Julia Mac Neil should accompany them from Strathshielie on a visit to England, and two days ere they left, Glenbenrough yielded to Lady Lauriston's urgent desire that Norah also should join the party. There had been a warm early friendship betwixt Lady Lauriston and Norah's mother, to whom Lady Lauriston had looked up as with the love of a younger sister ; and she now transferred this affection to her friend's daughter, to whom she promised to act the part of an elder sister. There were only two days to think of this proposal, which came upon all three sisters as a surprise. Esmé and Ishbel would not entertain any selfish regret, though it would be almost the first parting from each other ; for it was to be a happy one, as Norah was certain to enjoy herself in England ; her letters would be a pleasure to them, and she would write frequently. The bustle of Norah's packing was soon over, as not much of her wardrobe could go with her : it would not do to wear tartan skirts and Glengarry bonnets in England. Everything was ready the evening before, and Norah was standing at the window of her room, when Esmé joined

her, and saw tears in her eyes. Norah wiped them away, as she said, hesitatingly,—

“I am so sorry not to have been able to go to Glenbenrough, to have said good-bye to our dear old home, Esmé; to have seen the people, and Kelpie, and all again.”

Esmé knew there was another adieu which Norah would have liked to have spoken, and that it was first in her thoughts just then; so she whispered,

“Never mind, dear Norah; you will meet him soon in England. I believe this unexpected visit of yours to Yorkshire has been arranged for you; and I expect it to turn out well in every way.”

When Esmé returned to the drawing-room, her father gave her a letter, addressed to Marchmoram, to seal. She felt sure he must have mentioned Norah's departure in it, and thus Harold would hear of it next morning; but she thought it best to say nothing to Norah, lest her sister might count upon the chance of a farewell.

Next day the travelling carriage appeared punctual to the hour, soon after breakfast, and Norah parted from her father and sisters. The latter had sat up half the night together, having last words and little closing scenes of alternate joy and grief over Norah's plans and absence. When Glenbenrough placed Norah beside Lady Lauriston, he gave her over without a parting injunction; but he told her ladyship he would come to England for his daughter ere the heather bloomed again, and that he must carry back with him more than her. Lady Lauriston called out, with a gay laugh, that she and Sir Henry would return to the Highlands with him. Esmé and Ishbel ran up a bank in front of the house to get a vanishing view of the carriage, and then, with arms entwined, they sauntered on along the track of the wheels; neither of them spoke, until Ishbel, leaning her head on Esmé's shoulder, said,

“I am glad we are going home to-morrow,” a feeling to which Esmé assented with a weary sigh. When they got back to the house, they found Harold seated in the drawing-room. He said he had driven from Dreumah to pay a morning call; but his absent manner and perturbed expression did not show any flattering satisfaction in the result: he had arrived an hour too late. As Harold rose to leave, he said,

“Well, I must soon be on my southward way. It is time that *Harold's Hall* should be warmed for the winter. *Marchmoram* will come south with me; shooting at *Dreumah*;

becoming too hard work : even so far as the red deer are concerned, his heart is *not* in the Highlands at present."

Esmé and Ishbel returned home with their father next day. How beautiful Glenbenrough looked, as they came in sight of the river, golden in the light from the setting sun, while the approaching gloaming made shadowy the Roua Pass and all the surrounding hills. The russet hues of autumn were now making rapid advance ; the wild cherry-trees taking their hectic red of decline 'mongst the changing tints of pale green and golden yellow. This is the time when a Highland autumn takes its repose, ere the rough snows and storms of winter come to arouse it : the atmosphere floating languidly in a dreamy quiescence, after the warmth of summer. Florh was at the house when the family arrived ; having come to hear of the truth of Norah's departure, which she loudly lamented. As Florh assisted in unpacking in Esmé's room, she continued to lament Norah.

"Ah weel, ah weel !" she cried, "an' she's gone to England's countrie. I hope Miss Norah will come back as she went ; but I think there is one will go soon after her. I want none of my bairns to mate wi' England ; but an' it's no you, Esmé, dearie, I may had my peace. What would I hae done had you gone in place o' Miss Norah ? I would hae gone after you and keepit you from them. I tell ye, Esmé, ye wad nae live in England ; ye wad die there ! What could you do, wanting pure air and the rocky rivers o' the north ? Could you live in a country where the burns run like kennels, and the air is full o' reek ? and would ye like the scent of turnip-fields in place o' the heather and the birch ? Avoid it ! avoid it !"

"I am not in the least likely to go to England, Florh," said Esmé quietly, "so you need not think of it ; and even if I ever did go from the Highlands, I would be very sure to return again and again to them."

"You 'll ne'er—ne'er go !" Florh replied ; and she crossed herself (after a fashion she had acquired from her Roman Catholic mother) while she looked upon Esmé with the eye of a basilisk. "Ken I no your fate ?"

"Oh, Florh ! hush, hush !" exclaimed Esmé, sighing feverishly.

"Maybe ye 'll be glad to hear that I yet hae firm hand o' the joint clue o' Ewen an' Jeanie Cameron," said Florh after a pause.

"Have they made friends again, then ?"

"No," Florh replied quickly; "that would not be yet my wish. Oh! that foreign lad o' Mr. Harold's; he's clever beyond compare: my mind an' my heart draw to him as to a son."

"Florh, I intensely dislike the man!" Esmé pronounced decidedly.

"Weel, he's my right arm! to me o' priceless use: an' I'll yet make use o' him for yoursel', ma guil'," she muttered. "Mony's the hour o' pleasant companie he gies to me: but for him I never could hae staved off frae Ewen the truth o' his lassie's misdoings; for Ewen is aye at him, knowing that Gupini could gie witness o' any doings at Dreumah: he presses him hard, but Gupini can twirl my Ewen like a sling in his hand. An' I like to see him do it, for I am above baith him an' Ewen. Gupini listens to me; an' I hae confidence to work wi' him: the lad is really fond o' me."

Florh was right in the apparent fact of her having gained some influence over Gupini; he took actual pleasure in Florh's society; it was something congenial and refreshing in that otherwise very narrowed sphere to which this Highland shooting box confined him. He perceived Florh's strength of character, and appreciated her natural shrewdness; she could listen to his accounts of his travels with intelligent belief, applaud his adroitness, and enter into many of his experiences and adventures abroad.

The girls had been settled quietly at home for about a week; Ishbel had gone with Glenbenrough to a sheep-farm at some distance off, and Esmé was sitting in the garden on her rocky seat, writing at a little desk upon her knee, when suddenly a shadow fell upon the paper, and the stock of a gun came lightly down upon her shoulder. She looked up with a startled smile, and saw Normal Arduashien behind her. He threw himself down upon the grass, saying, "Oh, I am a wearied traveller, Esmé. I have walked from Arduashien this morning, and must be off to Lochandhu, where a dog-cart meets me: I am to be at Strathshielie in time for dinner."

"Back to Strathshielie again! This looks suspicious, Normal," said Esmé, with an arch smile. "I suspect—I suspect!"

"Don't, for you would be very far out," and Normal gave a fatigued sigh. "I am on my way to Thistlebank."

"Oh! to Thistlebank!" and Esmé's face clouded; she scarce knew why. "Well, you will of course come back this

way : I shall want to hear all about your visit, Normal. Now do notice what takes place in the drawing-room for once, as much as if it were in the woods."

"Why should I do so?" asked Normal, with a slightly sullen look : "what interest have you there, Esmé? You have strange interests; they are not readable to me. Esmé, your power is cruel : I will not lie under it."

"You are far more unreadable than I am, Normal," returned Esmé, looking down upon her paper, "and you know you always were. I have just been writing my will, and I have left you a lock of my hair."

Normal's face flushed deeply as he replied,

"I have more need to write my will than you, for I am going abroad. I feel I must throw off home trammels and boyish hallucinations," and he glanced half bitterly at Esmé, whose eyes now opened in surprise; "if I am ever to do any good : I only wait my father's consent to start at once."

"When did you think of this, Normal?" asked Esmé sorrowfully. She whispered to herself, "All are leaving me."

"The wish has long been stirring, and now can be refused no longer : I am going into some of the realities of life. I shall lead no dreaming existence abroad, Esmé; but seek occupation for mind and body, and go wherever both shall be exercised." He looked wistfully at her, and continued in a quiet, thrilling voice, "Esmé, the past pleasure in my life has been a dream; a bright visionary fabric, that I have spent many a foolish hour over : I am only a castle-builder, after all."

"They say youthful fabrics are unstable, Normal," Esmé replied gravely, "and you and I are very young."

"Yes; I am unknown, unproved : that is true." And he sighed bitterly. "When I return, it will be otherwise; but then it will be too late."

The next moment a different mood seemed to cross his mind. Turning, almost savagely, his light hazel eye, sparkling like a hawk's, he said quickly,

"Leave no remembrance to me, Esmé; I don't want it."

"Will you remember me without it?" she asked, looking up with an appealing, half-mocking smile.

"I think we have been friends together too long for either to forget the other, Esmé. I shall be away for a very long time; *and when I come back to the Highlands, you most likely will have left them : exchanged the deer's-grass for richer pastures.*"

and he rose and shouldered his gun. "I must go: Ewen is with me, and Florh has a luncheon feast prepared, so I must not disappoint her. Good-bye, until I return from Thistlebank," and Normal strode off, with his strong elastic step.

He had not betrayed aught of his weakness; had given no look, uttered no word to call forth her compassion. Entrenched in his pride, Normal walked on with the courage of the stoic, and the step of a conqueror.

Florh was standing at her cottage door, her hand shading her eyes, looking out anxiously for her son and her foster-son: she had mutton-ham, eggs, trout, and whisky ready within, and she was anxious for Normal's arrival. Ewen had been at Arduashien since the visit to Strathshielie; and Florh was delighted to hear he was going on to Thistlebank now: she hoped he would be kept from Lochandhu until the Dreumah party should depart; and she rather hurried him and his young master off, when the latter had finished his luncheon: she had a nervous dread upon her of Gupini coming. Normal and Ewen took the path past the trysting spring, which Esmé and Florh had visited before; a dog-cart was to meet them when they emerged upon the road, and take them on to Strathshielie. Ewen had a tame fox, which generally followed him part of the way when he left his home; it now ran into the thicket, and a moment afterwards a shot echoed near. Ewen called to his fox, and Normal stepped up a rocky hillock at the edge of the path, to see who the sportsman was. He caught sight of the brown shooting coat of Marchmoram, disappearing amongst the birch-trees, and he felt at that moment a keener thrill of interest than at the sight of the royal head of a red deer. Normal stood gazing on vacancy, and heard not the yelping of the dogs, nor Ewen's Gaelic curses, loud and deep. Ewen had called his fox just in time, for the next moment he saw it in chase, pursued by a couple of the Dreumah setters; but the creature, in its sagacity, ran straight to where he stood, and sprang into his arms just as he gave the foremost dog a kick that sent it howling backwards. A second shot, fired in the brushwood at a brace of hares startled out of covert by the noise, and a shrill whistle, called the dogs off; and Ewen saw before him Mr. Marchmoram. The latter deigned no notice of him, but taking out his flask, poured sherry into a quaich, filled it up with water from the spring, drank it, and sauntered on; stepping past Ewen as if he had been a stone in his path. *The Highlander then perceived another person, whom March-*

moram's figure had obscured : it was Jeanie Cameron, seated by the spring. A conscious smile was upon her rosy mouth, and she looked just as she should have done if Ewen had been sitting there with her, talking of future wedding plans. Urged by uncontrollable jealousy, he addressed his old love roughly, and spoke with a gibe :

"What are ye doing here? Have ye come to put on the gentleman's plaid for him, lass?"

"An' what have ye 'gainst the gentleman, Ewen? It's none o' your business what I do here : I am no seeking your company, an' let me seek mine where I will." And Jeanie pulled up the fern in handfulls, with an angry, bashful awkwardness.

"Look here, lass! ye must know your own mind, and I must know mine : if ye like to leave me, good and well. Go your gate; take ae lad you loe, an' I'll find a bonnier lass. But we shall settle it afore the meenister : ye shall tell him whom ye prefer, and afore him I'll gie you up. Ye canna refuse the custom," he continued with a shrill laugh, as he saw the colour fade from Jeanie's sun-burnt cheek. "An' now hear the end; ye'll tell your jo', an' I'll give you up: but, lass, lass! it must be no name to disgrace me; it must be a name o' a clan! Gin ye disgrace me by a stranger; gin ye confess to a stranger, to a proud southern farrand name, tak' care o't! I'll destroy it: I'll blot it out: I'll trample it into Hieland dust!"

"Go your way, lad," Jeanie said, unflinchingly; "ye hae nae right to speak to me yet : our troth was plighted till Martinmas next. If I hae nae changed my name afore that, I'll no be here to tell 't to you, or the meenister; maybe I'll be gone to a grander hoose nor you could ever hae gi'en me." And Jeanie glanced into the darkness of the thicket, with a reassuring smile.

Ewen clenched his hands. "I'll mind your words, lass; I'll mind your words. Till Martinmas next, take your ways; and then you'll be fain to speak afore the meenister. But oh, take care o' the name!"

He rushed past her, and rejoined Normal, who was considerably in advance. Ewen's head was thrown upwards, as he ran : had he looked down, his quick eye might have caught sight of Gupini, wriggling like a serpent through the heather, and creeping out of sight as fast as guilty fear could take him.

An hour later, Gupini sat in safety on a turf seat by Flora's

cottage door. She had her spinning-wheel out, and they were conversing on Dreumah ; but Gupini seemed rather absent and taciturn.

"And sæ ye think your master would care na bye for the grand ladies o' Thistlebank?" Florh inquired, as she busily twirled her thread.

"No; he have fresher fancy."

"He's his ain master, is he no? an' he has nae need, an' inclines no to wed for rank and gold an' high name, as ye think Mr. Marchmoram would; has he no?"

"Him have some romance: he marry only for love; but love very sensible—*bene scèlto*," Gupini replied, showing his white teeth. "But me no approve of marriage."

"Why not, lad?"

"If him marry—il buono Signor Harold—me go to Signor Auber. He suit me very well. Benedick master no suit me."

"I would like fine to hear more o' Mr. Marchmoram, Gupini, lad," Florh continued in a coaxing tone. "Did na Greaves gie a hint that he was to meet at Thistlebank a high London lady he had long gang hankering after?"

"Si, si; but I know not her name."

"What wad ye say if it's a cousin o' ye're ain master's?"

"Cosi è forse—well it may be so. I know few of my master's friends," Gupini replied, indifferently.

"Aye; I suspect it's yon grand duke's daughter: a tall, haughty, dark-eyed lady, high and cold as Ben Madhu," Florh said. "It'll be that Lady—Lady Ida—Beauregard. Oh! lad, lad, what ails ye? the sun has struck ye: keep quiet—hold, let me get ye water!" Florh exclaimed, pushing back her wheel violently, and rising in affright. Gupini's swarthy cheek had turned a greenish hue in the light of the sun; his lips had lost all colour, and he put his hand nervously across his heart, as he leant his head back against the wall of the cottage.

"Per Dio immortale! sono uomo morto!" he muttered faintly: "ahi, ahi!" Then, after a pause, "Grazia, Florh! It's nothing: only a heart pang I sometimes take. Bring me some of your strong whisky," he gasped out, as she brought a cup of water. "It's this accursed climate: it never suited me, and I must leave it now."

"Drink this, lad, drink this," Florh said, and she poured out nearly half a tumbler of whisky, which he drank off.

"Ah! Florh, that revives my heart!"

Florh watched him silently and anxiously, as, with face averted, he sat there for sometime motionless and silent: he then began to mutter to himself in Italian. At last he turned round with a loud laugh; his eyes glittered, and his cheek burnt bright red: the spirit had mounted to his head, and he burst forth into a sort of ranting frenzy, reciting, with exaggerated passion, passages from English and Italian plays.

Florh sat watching him, silently and anxiously, though very quietly, and occasionally saying, amidst the pauses of his rhapsody,

“Lad, lad! I ken na what ye’re meaning.”

To Florh, this strange fit of Gupini’s was inexplicable: his ravings were meaningless to her.

CHAPTER XVII.

FORESHADOWINGS.

How fondly would these arms around thee twine,
Asleep or waking I would love thee aye.

Cold as yon wintry cliff
Where sea birds chase with wearied wing:
Yet cold as rock, unkind as wave,
Isle’s maid, to thee I come.

Shadows of constraint were there,
That showed an over-cautious care
Some inward thought to hide.—SCOTT.

MARCHMORAM was seated in the drawing-room at Thistlebank, before dinner. It was superbly furnished, in a style to remind one of London, and was crowded brilliantly. The atmosphere was rather oppressive, from the heat of a huge fire burning in the polished grate, and the perfume of heliotrope issuing from the open door of an adjoining conservatory; whence slightly affected little laughs sounded, proceeding from the Miss Rankins, who were gathering a bouquet, in company with two young English noblemen, who had arrived from a neighbouring shooting-box, on their southward way, and a nice-looking young country girl, Miss Mackenzie of Ben Lie. The latter admired the flowers, and naively confessed ignorance of the learned botanical names which the Miss Rankins fluently

poured forth ; but she blushed deeply at the stare of inquiry and astonished laugh of one of the Miss Rankins, on her admiring the beauty of a fine scarlet geranium, and at the superlative smile of contempt with which the other said,

“ Do you really not even know the *Pelargonium* ? ”

There were several neighbouring country families on a visit at the house, and others were arriving daily to swell the guests round the dinner-table ; but Marchmoram's acquaintance extended no further than to Sir Roderick and Lady Glenmardie, Mr. and Mrs. Grant of Seatoun, and Lady Fraser of Forran, all of whom he had met at Strathshielie. The Miss Rankins moved about condescendingly amongst their friends, but made way deferentially as Lady Ida Beauregard entered, shortly ere the announcement of dinner. Lady Ida's manner had the highest degree of refinement. Miss Mackenzie of Ben Lie would not have hesitated to address her, feeling certain that the high-bred woman of rank would neither quietly smile contempt, nor draw general attention upon her ; and Normal Mac Alastair would have felt less reserve in answering her when she spoke, than in replying to one of the ill-bred and untitled Miss Rankins. But Lady Ida was, nevertheless, grave and haughty at Thistlebank. She sat a great deal in the duke's room, to which he was still confined : she wrote there, and within its seclusion her voice might often be heard in animated conversation ; but when she came out, her face wore the expression of reserve that it did now, as she exchanged salutations with Marchmoram. Yet there was *empressement* in the quiet shake of the hand. How was the strange and almost systematic contact of Lady Ida Beauregard and Mr. Marchmoram, which so continually occurred, to be accounted for ? To an on-looker their mutual approximation and intercommunication seemed accidental, for certainly neither glance nor smile from Lady Ida lured Marchmoram to her side ; yet every time she spoke, a graceful bow of reference brought him forward, to assent or gravely differ,

The evenings were very frozen at Thistlebank ; but then Lady Ida was naturally, where others were artificially, cold. A uniform, unbroken veil of snow wreathed her courtesy, and a naturally icy atmosphere froze her manner : yet it was refreshing in its way, amidst the glare of painted imitation. The Miss Rankins were strictly observant of etiquette in look and manner, and had carefully acquired rigidity of aspect and demeanour : each of them was quite able to preside over a stately

dinner, with all its tedium of restraint and formality ; but there was too much effort to accomplish this, the business and end of their life : they had little idea of aught beyond it.

How different—aye, wearisomely different—did the evenings now passed at Thistlebank appear to those passed at Glenbenrough : how different the fresh bloom of the Mac Neil's welcoming home the tired sportsman, and the bright beaming faces which came smiling out to applaud the trophies of his sport, from that sickly smile of languid interest now awarded at the dinner table by the fashionable young ladies here. The easy yet piquant converse of the circle at Glenbenrough was exchanged for the inanity of echoed opera and town gossip, and the weary affairs of public life coming round daily, stale and stagnant—because feebly spoken of ; the weightiest matter being mentioned with a silly lisp, or listened to with a vacant stare. There was no originality in any one of the young ladies of Thistlebank ; only from Lady Ida : let her speak, and statesmen might listen. Her voice was low, but it thrilled in the ear of a man of talent, as with native ease she grasped a subject vigorously, and presented it in a new point of view.

Normal Arduashien was very misanthropical at Thistlebank : he disliked going there at any time ; but he did not rebel on this occasion, as his father had already partly yielded to his desire of going abroad, and he wished to do everything in the meantime likely to please him, so as to ensure his assent. He was out all day long ; and in the evenings he sat down in some remote corner of the luxurious drawing-room, and there amused himself with a quiet scrutiny of the company. Lady Ida came in for a great share of observation, and Marchmoram was always under Normal's surveillance : they were thrown together one day out of doors, and a sympathy then arose between them, unexpressed on one side, unknown on the other. The gentlemen of the party had gone deer-stalking : the deer were to be driven from Roua Forest towards the passes of Craig Corloo ; and to the heights of the latter rocky range Normal went, accompanied by Ewen Mackenzie. The pass which ran beneath was very steep and narrow, and some of the sportsmen were posted in its recesses ; but Normal, knowing the ground better, preferred taking his chance from the height above, and firing, at longer range, downwards. They might have lain for an hour there, without having much hope of coming deer, and Normal had stretched himself lazily back, when his upward

gaze caught sudden sight of very different game. Sailing loftily, obscuring the light of the bright blue sky above him, appeared a splendid golden eagle, which, with drooping, heavy flight, alighted on a rocky point not twenty paces from where he lay ; so close, indeed, that the flashing of its wild bright eye, as it glanced majestically around, was distinctly visible : it glanced but once around ; then, in fearless security, and all unaware of man's vicinity, it began to plume its feathers. At the same moment Normal's attention was disagreeably distracted by a muttered oath from Ewen ; and, looking downwards, he saw the cause : a sportsman, with shouldered gun, advancing along the pass. He recognized Mr. Marchmoram, who thus unfairly (though perhaps in ignorance of Normal's proximity) had changed his own station, and took a position on the pass right beneath where Normal lay : a sharp turn, round which the advancing deer must come, precluded all rivalry now ; for now Normal could not fire from above without imminent danger to Marchmoram, who was posted beneath. Something very like an answering oath to Ewen's escaped from Normal's lips, as he whispered keenly,

" I shall lose my shot ! "

" Chance it ! chance it ! " Ewen muttered eagerly.

" Are you mad ? " Normal retorted angrily. " No, not though I never shot a deer again ! "

Ewen leant over the ledge himself and looked down on Marchmoram's figure beneath, with the angry glare of an ambushed tiger. The deer were coming, when Ewen's foot or elbow became suddenly entangled ; the click of a trigger was heard, the upward toss of a hand was seen, and the rifle lay discharged at their feet, but guiltless of death or injury to any one.

" Good God be thanked ! Ewen, how did it go off ? There has nearly been murder ! " Normal ejaculated, springing to his feet.

" I suppose I made it go off ; or, maybe, you pushed it yourself : it was only on half-cock, " Ewen muttered sullenly. His face was lividly pale, and his hands shook nervously : he gave a faint grin, as he said, " It's spoiled his sport, whatever. " The distant echo of the report had scarcely ceased, and the smoke cleared off, when an angry masculine voice came shouting from beneath. Marchmoram stood out in Normal's sight, and in a loud, incensed tone demanded who had fired the shot.

"It was my gillie, Ewen Mackenzie, by accident; and I regret it much," Normal shouted in answer.

"Why take a stupid, ignorant fellow like that, to spoil sport, and run the risk of accident? A man is bound to have a suitable servant with him," Marchmoram replied, still angrily: "had I got him here, I'd have horsewhipped him."

"Silence! be quiet, Ewen!" Normal said, as he saw the hot blood mount to the Highlander's pallid face; "he has every cause to be angry."

Normal brought home a magnificent golden eagle that night: he tracked and shot the bird he had so generously sacrificed to Marchmoram's chance of the deer in the morning. Lady Ida Beauregard expressed a flattering wish to see the unusual trophy, and she went out to the hall and looked at it admiringly, with haughty grace. She said to Normal that evening, also, when Marchmoram was not very far off,

"I have a favour to ask of you, Mr. Mac Alastair? I observed a fine eagle plume in your bonnet that day when we met: I should like to have it."

Normal bowed low, and slightly blushing, left the room, and returned with the feather.

"I shall keep it as a remembrance of a very serious day in my life. I suppose that, had you not been so providentially near me, there was no other hope of succour from that madman. In what direction had you come—from beneath the gorge?"

"No, I had taken an upper path, Lady Ida; but one as desolate as yours: I passed but one other human being ere I reached you."

"A man?" she asked, with a bland, inquiring smile.

"Yes; and an active, agile man, too. I met your cousin's Italian valet ascending from the gorge shortly before I came up to you."

"Is he my cousin's valet? Good God!" mentally ejaculated Lady Ida, and her eyes assumed a strange expression: she put her hand to her brow, then said, with a forced smile, "I must really not speak of this adventure: it excites me yet. I am afraid an Italian valet would not have had the presence of mind and courage of a Highland gentleman," she continued, with a slight bend of her head. "By-the-by, I must read a letter just received from Basil; I am anxious to hear his plans:" and she left the room. This letter told Lady Ida that Harold had altered his previously arranged plan, and now intended

going south, direct from Dreumah ; merely resting a night at Glenbenrough, a place he must tell her about by-and-by ; and that, as he hoped the duke would consider Britton the best change of air on quitting Scotland, they would likely soon meet in old Yorkshire again, for he was now on his way home to Harold's Hall. Lady Ida frowned, and read the note again. After dinner, she took up a book and reclined with it upon a sofa near the fire ; holding a fan before her eyes, to let it be inferred that she did not wish to be disturbed.

Mr. Marchmoram was standing very near to Lady Ida, who still sat on the sofa with the book in her hand ; for she seldom moved from one seat all the evening. Miss Rankin was now sitting by her, and Lady Ida said, *sotto voce*,

"By-the-by, do you know the name of a pretty girl in white, with flowing golden hair, at the Couchfern ball ? She was so graceful and ærial, she might have personated Miranda or Ondine."

"Oh, that was the second Miss Mac Neil of Glenbenrough," Miss Rankin replied. "I thought I had told you her name at the ball. We know them very slightly."

"There was something mystic in the peculiar blue of her eyes. I could not help noticing them, as I happened to find them very frequently fixed on myself. Is Glenbenrough a very wild place ?"

"You must really ask Mr. Marchmoram," Miss Rankin said ; "he has been there so much this autumn."

"Ah !" exclaimed Lady Ida, with a slight look of surprise : then turning to Marchmoram with her cold, haughty voice, she asked, "Is Glenbenrough a very wild place ?—suited to the second sight and prophetic mysteries, Mr. Marchmoram ?"

"I dare say it is, Lady Ida," he replied in a low tone ; "it is a very enjoyable place, and very beautiful."

"You liked being there !" remarked Lady Ida, with a curious smile on her thin lip. "You were in the midst of youth, of free and unfettered spirits !" There was the slightest tinge of satire in her ladyship's tone.

"Yes, free and unfettered : the scenery there is conducive to that."

The approach of others of the company, as a move was made for a general withdrawal, interrupted the conversation at this point.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LOVERS' ADIEUX.

"He passed the court gate, and he sped the tower grate,
And he mounted the narrow stair."

"I hae naeboddy now, I hae naeboddy now
To meet me on the green,
Wi' light locks waving o'er her brow
And joy in her deep blue een.
There's naeboddy kens, there's naeboddy kens—
And, oh! may they never prove
This sharp degree o' agonie,
For the loss o' their earthly love."

"Oh! think nae ye my heart was wae.
When I turned about away to gae?"

THE ladies were still lingering in the hall, or slowly mounting the broad flight of stairs to their rooms, when Marchmoram hurried through; neither looking at, nor listening to, anything around him, he hastened through a long side corridor, and entered his own room; then shutting the door, and locking it, lest his valet should come to disturb him, with quick and perturbed steps he paced up and down the apartment. Marchmoram's nature was one of those that, like some deep seas and lakes we know of, suddenly arouse and lash their waves in wild, dreadful play, with little visible cause. His nature was of dangerous excitability; but with a stern governing will, he held a strong curb upon himself. His passions might rage at will within; but they should show no semblance without: he could prevent that, at least. The time was come to let them loose just now: their warfare was beginning, and he must give them room, or they would rend the walls of their prison. A strange fire burned in his kindling eyes, as he paced up and down the room in a paroxysm of excitement, his lip quivering, his strong hands clenched, and words pouring out with frenzied vehemence.

"It is within my grasp—within my grasp now: the determination—the vow of years! I know it! I feel it! My power has served me well. The glorious conquest is in my grasp! Shall I now turn to the dalliance of love? were that well done? no! no! I must play out my game: the stake is risked, and the die is cast. Oh! Esmé! Esmé, mine! feel

for me, feel for me! This woman requires revenge: she was proud and cruel to me, Esmé! I did not love her; but my boyish aspirations worshipped her intellect. Love! what knows she of it? I knew it not myself till now. But I gave her that which, to her, meant all: I gave her my ambitious hopes and worship. To her that was the life-blood of the heart: it stirred the depths of her feeling when she knew me to be ambitious as herself. And in that she should have shown sympathy. But she spurned me! 'Strength with strength,' she said: 'I will match with my equal.' She laughed at me; she despised my power; she tried to crush me with her irony. Oh! foolish woman, have I not conquered thee at last? Her scorn gave me a new impetus; her disdain urged me on with fresh energy. She had not time to disentangle her early interest from mine: it went with me. She has unceasingly watched my career, and she sees success before me; all sought and won in spite of her.

"Oh, Esmé! I vowed that she should swell my triumph at the end: for years I have strained and striven for the time when she should bow to me; when, with her great power, she should work subservient! Do you not wish this crown of victory for me, Esmé? Oh, Esmé, if she still held aloof! Were I not to meet her, I might forget, and turn to the loved one in my path. But risk it not; oh! dear one, risk it not. I have so vowed, so dreamt of conquering her, that to meet her, were I bound outwardly to thee—and so she must feel safe—would madden me. Let me conquer her first; and then let me seek you, if not lost! Esmé, I will see you: I will tell you all! Let me go out to breathe the free air."

He threw open the window. The moon was at her full, and sailing rapidly past, amid stormy white-flaked clouds; shadows lost themselves hurriedly on the naked rocks, or danced grotesquely over the grassy slopes: unrest seemed everywhere; without as well as within. The window was but a short distance from the ground, and he jumped out. The roar of water guided him to where was a waterfall near the house: a path led up to it through a straggling wood of Scotch firs. He sat him down upon a dilapidated rustic seat, near the edge of the bank and overhanging the fall. The wind soughed fitfully through the pines, and his pulse throbbed to its music. But as he sat, nature calmed: the breeze died mournfully away, and the moon came floating out from the shadow of the wood; *her serene orb hung pendant in silvery brightness right above*

the waterful, its foaming spray glittering in the rays. All was still and quiet now; the air scarce stirred sufficiently to sway the tendrils of the weeping birch, as its long feathery tresses swept downward against the sky. He gazed up to the heavenly blue above: Esmé's eyes seemed to shine in that pure deep hue: it sank melting to his soul. Marchmoram arose, and, like one in a trance, traced his way to the stables, which were about half-a-mile from the house. The doors were unlocked; he entered, took down a saddle, and went up to one of the horses, which had turned in the stall and, snorting, watched him with seeming wonder expressed in the soft brown eye: he saddled and led the animal forth, mounted and rode slowly away towards Glenbenrough. It was between two and three in the morning when horse and rider emerged from the hill track which Marchmoram had taken, and came out upon the road a little below the bridge. The old gray house looked very quiet in the moonlight, and the river flowed darkly and sleepily along: not even the solitary hoot of an owl from the thick old trees in front, where they nightly congregated, broke the stillness. Marchmoram here dismounted. His face, pale as marble, seemed more immovable than aught in sleeping nature around; the lips were firmly closed, but the troubled spirit looked out from his eyes. He led the horse across the bridge, tied the bridle to a tree on the garden bank, and walked towards the house.

Esmé sat up late in her room, reading and writing, and had fallen asleep while listening to the wailing winds without and watching the moon drive past before the pursuing stormy clouds. The window in her room was curtainless, for she always liked looking out nightly upon the heavens from her pillow ere she fell asleep. She had been sleeping for some time; her fancy wandering wildly in dreams, when, on a sudden she woke up—as from a strange inward impulse—opened wide her eyes, and, with an electric feeling of surprise, started into wakefulness. What was impending? what was this? A chill, nameless feeling of awful uncertainty crept coldly over her, as if it were a mysterious foreboding of a spiritual presence. All was still, without and within: the midnight sky was overcast. Presently a sound was heard beneath the window; her ear caught the sound of a quiet footfall; a step approached, *crushing the gravel*: some one stood motionless beneath the window. Esmé pressed her hand tight against her heart to *keep down its bounding pulses*, as feverish reactions sent the

tide of life coursing rapidly through her veins : her whole being was absorbed in a dreamy, breathless suspense. Was it real ? What—who could it be ? The hall door creaked slowly upon its hinges ; a step was heard slowly and firmly ascending the stairs : she heard breathing outside the door, and knew the lock would turn. Her eye dilated, and the throbbing of her heart became intense as, in breathless silence, she lay expectant. The night grew gloomier ; thick clouds obscured the moonlight ; but she could distinguish a shadow falling from the opening door, and advancing almost in the centre of the room : an awful, indefinable shadow. It fell upon her pillow ; it assumed material form. In a low, deep, and thrilling murmur, Esmé heard her name. Her outstretched arm was grasped with warm living pressure ; and, standing near her in the darkness, whispering low, Marchmoram spoke.

“ Esmé, Esmé ! loved one ! wake and hear me ! ”

Her lips moved, but formed no word : they quivered convulsively. She felt the blood mount to her brain, which reeled dizzily. No answer came ; but Marchmoram must have known that she heard him, for he spoke again, in hurried, urgent tones.

“ I have come to tell you—to tell you this : sooner or later I will claim you. Esmé, through all, through everything, trust my love ! Let your love be faithful and strong as mine, and sooner or later I will yet return to claim you. Be this hour—this ring—our pledge. Esmé, Esmé ! tell me you hear and believe me.”

The voice that had exercised greater influence over her than aught other on earth, could bring no answer now. Esmé was indeed spell-bound ; for almost ere he ceased, over-wrought feeling brought upon her that weakness which she had ever dreaded, but never met before—unconsciousness : she fainted silently away, and lay as one dead. At that moment Ishbel, in the inner room, awoke and turned restlessly on her pillow ; while Marchmoram, with stealthy footfall, quietly and slowly descended to the hall door. Dawn was breaking grayly over the hills, and tinging with pale bluish hue the red precipice of the Roua Pass, as he loosed the horse's bridle and led it down the river bank to Esmé's spring, beside the ruined old stone cross. He knelt and drank deeply there. A wooden ledge ran round the rim, which Esmé had placed for kneeling on when she stooped to drink. He wrote upon it in pencil, “ Godfrey—Friday night,” then mounted and rode on.

As Marchmoram was leaving the house of Glenbenrough, the

figure of a woman wrapped and hooded in a large blue homespun cloak, loomed through the early morning mist on the opposite side of the river. It was Florh Mackenzie, returning from a cottage near the farm of Phee, where an old man had died the previous day: she had been observing the general custom of the country in taking her turn to watch the midnight hours beside the unburied coffin. She was wending briskly homewards now, so as to be in time to attend to the early milking of the cows. As she passed the house, her eye hastily glanced across the water, and she instantly recognized Marchmoram. Florh's nerves were well and steadily strung; but still she was startled, and paused in sudden wonder. What did he there at that strange hour? He had not been at Glenbenrough that night: he had said good-bye, and left Dreumah some time ago. She darted behind a birch-tree, crouched down, and watched him with the wariness of a fox. She saw him go lingering past, with his head turned back toward Esmé's window; and as he moved down the river bank, she retraced her steps and followed also. She saw him reach the tree where the horse was tied, loosen it, and lead it on to the spring, at which he drank. As he mounted and galloped away at speed—showing that he thought it was time he should be gone ere the sun rose clearer—she threw up her arms and called after him a strong remonstrative sentence in Gaelic: had he been dragged dead up to the door of Thistlebank, such would likely have been the fulfilled translation of it. She then drew her cloak tightly round her, and walked sturdily on to Lochandhu.

Recklessly, exultingly, Marchmoram urged the animal on through bog and dell, over slippery rock and across bed of streamlet. No time was now to be lost, lest curious eyes should witness his return. Well might the good horse be blown, and his sleek coat be flecked with foam, when, relieved of his rider's weight, he trotted up to his stable door; for he had been hard pressed on a two hours' fearful gallop. By a direct but dangerous track through the hills, Marchmoram had gone from, and returned to, Thistlebank. An under groom was moving drowsily as Marchmoram rode up, and the man gave a knowing wide-awake nod as he led the horse into the stable and closed the door. Marchmoram in dismounting had thrust a five pound note into his hand, saying,

"I had occasion to take the horse: rub him down."

What mattered it to Donald where the horse had been taken

to? He never talked of Marchmoram's ride; he was honest, and knew what he had been paid for: he was also naturally a taciturn and cautious Scotchman.

"Maybe the gentleman had gone off to spear a salmon wi' the young laird o' Couchfern, though it was close time: and what harm? Or, maybe the gentleman had gone to the hill to taste a drop o' rael stuff, and see the working o' a Hie'land still. 'Deed Donald did na care."

But Ewen shared the truckle bed of Donald in the loft above the stable, and heard Marchmoram come home; he had also seen him ride away; for he was in a sleepless mood that night. However, he never discussed his joint knowledge with Donald, nor claimed any reward for secrecy. He also was a Scotchman, —quiet, taciturn, slow, and cautious.

The ladies had left the dining-room ere Marchmoram appeared at breakfast that morning; but in the forenoon he walked into the drawing-room shortly ere the arrival of the post. Lady Ida was present, and gave her usual salutation with haughty grace. There was something very imperious in her general manner towards Marchmoram; but his seemed to require it: it bore such an air of masculine self-control when in converse with her; and the satirical smile, or the cool defiant eye, was always ready to bear down her pride. Occasionally at other times, when she condescended to exert herself sociably and let fall a little frothing conversation, while all others listened deferentially, Marchmoram turned absently away, with a perfectly well-bred, but very repellent, indifference. Notwithstanding these antagonistic influences in manner, they constantly sought each other out, and commingled curiously. The Miss Rankins slightly bantered him on his late appearance; while he entered into livelier badinage in return than they were able to support, until the happy arrival of the post saved the failure of their wit; when all were engrossed in their correspondence. Marchmoram retreated to a window with his letters and papers, while Lady Ida sat down with the *Times*, ere she opened any of her despatches. Suddenly she exclaimed, in a low voice, "Oh, poor fellow! Papa must instantly write. If we take it in time we shall succeed;" and, folding up the paper she left the room. The eldest Miss Rankin, who had been seated near Lady Ida, also glancing over the news, looked after her with a species of admiration, and muttered,

"Well, that certainly is the most iron-nerved woman imaginable."

"Has she read of any bad news, poor dear lady? Lady Fraser of Forran inquired anxiously.

"Yes, in one way," Miss Rankin replied: "but she's thinking of how to turn it to account. I would not but my eye fell upon the paragraph she was reading; was talking on the subject politically only yesterday: so And she read aloud from her newspaper,

"We regret to learn that Sir Francis Sornton, the popular Lillsdale, lies almost hopelessly ill at Sornton Hall, in consequence of the accident met with in hunting on Friday week, and which terminated at the time."

"He is such a nice creature! I have met him and he married only lately a friend of Lady Ida's. His ship became rather excited yesterday in talking of his presentation of the great borough of Lillsdale. Sir Francis Whig; but she said were he to vacate, a great triumph might be gained by the Conservative interest; and not so absorbed in the probability, that I really believe gone at this moment to discuss with the duke the consequences."

"My dear, my dear, I hope not," good old Lady Fraser hurriedly, pushing up her spectacles with nervous hands; "few men could be harder than that. Oh! to preserve us from the world in its many shapes o' heartles!"

"They all take refuge in —— expediency, Lady!" Marchmoram said, with a peculiar curl of the lip vanished quickly from the room.

The kind old woman did not like nor understand this but she felt that, at any rate, it expressed no contempt self or her simplicity.

Marchmoram proceeded to the duke's sitting-room: had the *entrée* of the duke's room ever since his arrival the duke was nearly convalescent, and expected to join the table that day. He was reclining on a leathern sofa library table before it; and the resemblance betwixt him and daughter, who sat near him, was very striking. The tall thin man, with grizzled hair and dark complexion; eyes, being pale blue instead of black, gave an expression of greater blandness to his face: there was more repose though perhaps less talent. He had a settled, thoughtful air of a man who, having chosen his work, becomes in it as much from habit as from inclination. The duke and Lady Ida were talking of Lillsdale &

moram entered : a portfolio and papers lay before her. Steps had to be taken and letters written : Lady Ida understood all, and was ready. Marchmoram gazed at the inflexible figure, and listened to the keen reasoning with which she spoke on this and other dry and weighty matters. There was, indeed, no sentiment about Lady Ida ; she was all practical and persevering ; but never rose to enthusiasm in success. She calculated now on Sir Francis's death ; but she did not wish it : she truly hoped he would recover ; yet still the rugged fact of its close possibility must be dealt with. If he died, the seat was empty, and possession must be immediately secured by them. No picture of the young bride-friend, then wailing and praying for her husband's life, rose to disturb her clear business views. Marchmoram sat a long time in the duke's room : he wrote there, spoke, listened, and worked ; then arose and went out, to be refreshed by nature on the Highland hills.

Normal Mac Alastair rested at Florh's cottage at Loch-andhu some days after this, on his return to Arduashien from Thistlebank ; where a feeling that he owed only to himself, had delayed him so long—it was a craving desire to witness Marchmoram's departure from the country. He was going soon himself ; but there would have been no peace in his own parting days had they been shared, however vaguely, by Marchmoram's presence. He had seen him go, and knew that his rival had left Thistlebank for the south two days previously ; so Normal said adieu there as soon as possible after. As he sat before a peat fire in Florh's cottage, smoking a cigar, he looked content : no sullenness was on his brow ; and he leaned back with enjoyable ease, and unusual light of pleasure in his eye. Florh sat in her birchen rocking-chair, a little back from the glow and rather in the shade of the room ; she watched Normal and studied every line in his face, as she swayed herself to and fro, and her words came forth smooth and flowing with the motion. Florh looked a handsome woman, with her cool hazel eye, full red lip, and strong, broad-chested figure. The fox that Ewen had tamed, lay at her feet, curled up beneath the folds of her tartan gown, now and then raising inquisitively his pointed nose, and cocking his ears as they talked. Florh had gained much more influence over Normal than over Esmé : indeed, over the latter she possessed it principally through affection. Esmé had given her that, with the buoyant warmth of her nature, ever since her childhood, but had remained *unsusceptible to the cunning lurking in her foster-mother's*

caresses. Florh, exerting all her tact, had penetrated the reserve of Normal's character, and got to the very depths of it. Normal was more open with Florh than with any one else; no boyish reserve ever restrained him when alone with her, and it was a great relief to talk, as he did now, with perfect openness.

"Well, Mathair Florh, I shall have a little quiet time I hope at Glenbenrough now, until the time is fixed for my going abroad. My father leaves the day to my own choice, and would like to have such a parting time at Glenbenrough, as may look back upon afterwards."

"Ye hae need o' that, Normal dear: it would ill become me after all the years that hae passed, to go glooming away. Your pleasure at Glenbenrough was too much shared this summer."

"Yes, Florh," he replied, looking quietly into the fire; "was not an autumn at Glenbenrough to please me."

"Aye, ye may say yon. What right had the English sportsmen o' Dreumah to come harrying down on that which no one ever could have given them?" Florh threw deep meaning in her voice; and, as Normal looked up at her, she continued, "Aye, ye ken what I mean, Normal. I grudged the red deer o' the hills o' Glenbenrough, and I grudged sore the bonny boys playing in the garden coverts: I grudged the very bread in the house that the English broke."

Normal reddened and fidgeted on his seat, as he answered, "It was not likely I should like their intimacy, Florh; for it gave me a sore heart. Oh! that I could for just that time have exchanged with them, Florh! Could I but have given them an eye and hand for a tongue, they would not have harmed or hurt me as they did. I would have seen my rifle miss the deer, as I oft saw theirs do—I would have seen the grouse winged away—I would have shrunk from swimming at night in the cold loch of Nightach in pursuit of my wounded stag; could I but have played a part to better suit a woman for that time! But I could not talk with a borrowed, fluent tongue. I could not assume the polish of the high-bred gallant in that manner: I could not dance with their foreign grace! No; could I but beat them on the hill, when no woman's eye was there to see; and where I durst not boast, lest the conquered should despise me, and I despise myself. My eye was first, my aim more sure; but bootless that triumph in the walls of Glenbenrough. My tongue was silent in the drawing-room: it said

not even the stillness of a sunny hour in the open air. They could even speak better to the fancy of her I loved on the very subject of my native scenery. When we all sat out together on the glorious hills, they robbed for me the colours, and laid them in words of beauty at her feet! I could only feel. I never could speak forth my thoughts." Normal's eloquence rose to its height, as he now poured forth his bitter feelings of tortured pride, and unbending conviction of his own inward equality with the strangers. Florh did not rouse him up: that was not her object: she would rather calm him in the meantime; for she loved her foster-son, and she had yet to lay other things before him. He should not go abroad in ignorance of her own surmises as to Esmé; but they must be very cautiously and gradually propounded. The only thing she might give full vent to was her hatred of Marchmoram; and, to justify this, and bring forth a satisfactory response from Normal, she would bring home the terrible fact to him. She began cautiously, saying in a beseeching tone, different from her first,

"To gae frae Scotch an' English to forriners! Oh! it's me that wishes you could tak my Ewen wi' ye, when ye go, Normal dear: och hone-a-rie, it's little ye ken the weight would be off me!"

Normal looked up with a little surprise at her sudden vehemence, as he replied,

"You know, Florh, you could not wish him to go more than I do; but my father is absolutely *dour* on the subject: he says if I have Ewen to talk Gaelic with, I'll never learn any other language. Wait a year: if I do not then come home, I'll send for him. A year is not very long for him to be separated from me."

"I am no sae foolish as to make a work for that," Florh replied, "nor for longer time; but there is a reason now why I'm praying to get free o' him, till I see my way for his happiness clearer. Oh, Normal! I'll open my heart to you; for it's little comfort or good that came o' me doing it to Esmé, *puir lambie!*"

Then, with gesticulative energy, and keen biting words, Florh laid before Normal the evidence of Jeanie's guilt, as she had long previously done to Esmé; only that the details were fully marked now: for Gupini had fully satisfied her on them all, leaving very little doubt on the subject. And Ewen, even, had given the strongest proof to her, where only suspicion had

struck himself, in telling her of the day that he and N had found Jeanie and Marchmoram in such close proximity the spring. Normal took the cigar from his mouth : concluded, and striking his hand, exclaimed,

"Villain ! he would not be safe from poor Ewen's dir he but know of it !"

"Aye, see ye no *now* why I should want Ewen out country. His secret mind is ever on Mr. Marchmoram did he find it out for certain, oh ! what but vengeance satisfy him ? Ewen's pride first cankered agin him at mah : an' my Ewen was treated as if he was ane o' the h after that. But the worst was the day the Englishman him at Corrieandhu, for offering to guide Miss Esmé's p

"I remember that," Normal said ; and his brow knit, threw the rest of his cigar into the fire.

"My heart is sair to get Ewen out o' the country. is off ; and since that day (Mr. Marchmoram left Dreum about the same time) Jeanie has no been seen at kirk, c about her father's door. Gupini worked wi' me to l quiet frae Ewen, for he knew his temper ; but gin he next autumn, an' Ewen in the country, I dout he can na stand frae telling it. But Ewen away, the secret's saf I'd make up my mind now to end it for Ewen at the las

"That will not be easy, Florh !" Normal exclaimed he flushed angrily. "Ewen shall never marry this gin least, if he has the meanness to do it, never let him exp to take notice of him, or of her, after !"

"Weel, ah weel ; it's me that is sair tried !" cried "I wad wish my son's happiness : he and Jeanie ha such long years contracted : ye hae nae notion o' the fee him o' it all. The silly lass is sure to repent ; an' c keep her secret frae Ewen, I don't know but in time I let him take her : she would be sure to mak him a gui wi' me over. What I haud and a power I would have all her life, Normal ! Me, wi' her secret in my very ha

Florh spoke with a sort of gusto, as her characteris of power rose in her mind.

"Florh," Normal replied quickly, "let there be no c plots and concealments. The marriage must be brot You have only to speak to Ewen's pride : tell him J worthiness ; but conceal the name of the man. He nee know that. He *must* never know it !"

"Aye, you know the madness that might come on

Florh exclaimed. "All along I determined that he wad never hear Mr. Marchmoram's name from me, whatever he might think. I could break off the match, too; but I like seeing my way lang, lang before me, and working out to the end: no to end things sudden, like."

"Well, I shan't have Ewen abroad until you make an end of it, Florh: and you are too clever not to be able to manage this in the best way."

"Weel, weel, I must think, Normal, dear: your word is my law. I will think. Their contract is not over till Martinmas, and I could not break it, nor any one else, till then."

She sat in silence in her rocking-chair, gazing anxiously on her foster-son, who had resumed smoking, and was stirring the turf ashes absently with his outstretched feet, as he leant back on his lowly seat. After one or two attempts to speak, ending with abrupt failure in a nervous cough, Florh at last broke silence again; and her voice strengthened soon into kindled energy.

"Oh, Normal! this Mr. Marchmoram is a bad, bad man! I will go on wi' him, now, and speak free to you. Why should my bairn, my bairn Esmé—the flower o' our hearts—be misguided? be the only one misguided, and, perhaps, ta'en from us all? Aye, Normal, there's Miss Norah; though 'tis an Englishman fancies her, and she fancies him, no great harm past that o' his birth will come of it. His heart is good, his mind is high enough; an' if she be content to leave her bonny Hielands, I'll no say but she may find content enoo in England countrie. There is no doubt she has chosen pretty weel. But Esmé—oh! Esmé, no good will come of it! Did she no dream before ever she met them? Normal, she was warned, early this very autumn, o' shadow and storm coming on her happy life; and, what's more, I read to her the name the very clouds pointed out. I knew your name was within her reach at yon time, and, when she told me the shapes o' the vision, I read plain: an' the dream that followed will be true, unless Providence saves her and strengthens her mind. Mark my words, Normal, if Esmé marry an Englishman, she will find an early and a stormy grave. It has been written!"

She fixed her eyes in fierce answering stare, as Normal flashed his upon her, and then turned away.

"Florh!" he exclaimed in a low voice, trembling with feeling, "do you really believe Esmé loves one of these Englishmen? Is it Marchmoram?"

"Oh, my son Normal! I hae reared you, I hae aared I loe you both: but I winna hae you both go astray togeth A year ago, aye, six months ago, I felt Esmé's mi (as and free as the winds in its fancies) would still never slow far off frae the airt o' its early youth. My eye was watchfu', and my tongue ready to soother it back to the What scope could she want beyond them? But th dei sent his gales to swirl her out o' our reach: her heart and mind are clouded in the lift to me, noo! Oh! Normal, m her heart is safe to ye yet; maybe it is not: it is sought wi' deadly art. Should she gang a weary gate, ye maun r after her; for not one o' us could bring her back: it's us to influence or interfere. 'Gin she goes wilfully to l her heart, ye'll no break *yours*, my son? I could na los both."

"Oh, Florh!" and Normal spoke with passionate exultity, ill-suppressed; "I did not think of it coming to this am glad I am going away: I could not bear it! I could bear it!" Then, turning upon her with sudden vehem he continued, "But if she does not speak to you of it, he you know? And how do you know whether he has spok her of love more than I have done? I have never told love her."

A smile, half pitying, half sneering, passed over Florh's

"And do ye think I don't know Esmé's face, and can't it? me, that can read the dreams o' the brain, Normal? well do I know it; and hae seen more glances o' bonny cast their sheen on the glittering smiles o' the English ever met yours, Normal. You were aye too cold! An' ye really they never spoke of love to her? I trow you an' will take different beats in that."

"Tell me all you know, or have seen: speak quickly to Florh! It's the first and last time I wish to speak of and he listened, looking away from her.

"Weel, I'll tell ye the last o' it; an' that which induce to speak to ye this day, Normal, my son. Take the quiet; an' mind, above all, that whatever *he* is, *she* is I bairn in years. Oh! the deil came riding in darkness, blackness, haunting her dreams by night as well as by Where were ye? It was not like you, to lie on your woollen bed the mirk hours o' night that he was loupin by the Corrloo Hills, and casting his shadow within the walls o' the sleeping peace o' Glenbenrough."

"Florh!"

"Aye; I seen Marchmoram, with my own een, lingering doun the steps o' the hall door before cock-crow on Saturday morn, ah' me standing with the river stween us! It was no second sight—no dream, Normal! The morn was that still I could hear the gravel crinch below his feet, as he went daundering past and gazing up at Esmé's window. Oh, Normal! she was na there, or my voice wad hae sounded and risen the laird from his bed from where I was standing! An' oh! maybe she does na even know he was there; but it's a thing I daur never, never mention: maybe it was his own deevilry altogether. I saw him untie his horse frae the black gene tree, and then gang doun to the spring; and he put some mark there after he drank." (Poor Normal shuddered.) "He mounted his horse then, and away he went at a gallop; and I sent a good prayer after him. I was raised to that degree I forgot to cross mysel', Normal; an' that's why the hoodie craws weren't howking his lips, when ye were sitting doun to your Thistlebank breakfast, Normal."

Normal bent down his head upon his breast, and his fingers worked together convulsively, as he murmured absently,

"Oh, Esmé, Esmé, Esmé! You do this? Blackness! darkness!—And I was sleeping that night!"

"Gaolach!" Florh whispered, a strange light playing over her face; "there's a glimmer in the darkness. I can see it; but it's no time to tell't yet. I hae a clue, I hae a clue; a faint, faint divining thread: it may thicken on to the end and save ye baith, or it may break asunder; that depends on what I canna control—I can only wi' humbleness hold the clue."

Normal did not hear her: he continued to entwine his fingers and wring his hands silently. After a time he looked up: his eyes were tearless, but bloodshot, and the colour of his face was a grayish marble.

"Florh, don't fret for me! I don't fret for myself: not a bit of it! Let me away—away:—it's all I want." He rose up and pushed the long hair off his brow. "You said Esmé's mind was not one to be influenced or interfered with! Neither is mine; and I have made it up. I'll go now to Glenbenrough and say good-bye there. I won't be back again: I'll leave home next week. My father allowed me to fix what date I liked: I'll be out of the country soon."

He hurried on his plaid as he spoke. "Call Ewen to harness the horse and put in all the traps, and let him be

waiting on the bridge for me: I won't stay long at Glenbenrough. Good-bye, just now, Florh. God bless you! Come to Arduashien ere I go." His hand burned, as it grasped the large cool hand of his foster-mother.

"Aye! I will go after you, Normal, my son. It is you that are strong, chlan cinneadh og chlann Alastair!" (young chief of the Mac Alastairs). "You'll neither sink 'gainst the current, nor throw yoursel' to the waterfall! Normal, success is for you; all will yet be well."

He *was* strong; he *was* proud. He stepped with quick elastic footing o'er the brown heather, and he sang as he went, low and unmusically. Florh heard the echo from her cottage door, though she knew not the words: they were these:

"The shallowest water makes maist din,
The dearest pool the deepest linn,
The richest man least truth within,
Though he preferred be.

Yet, nevertheless, I am content,
And think the time was a' weel spent,
And never a bit my love repent,
Though I disdained be."

His mood changed from time to time, and took utterance in other measure of the song. With clenched hand and fierce knitted brow he sang over and over again, as he proceeded, the words grinding vindictively between his teeth,

"I lighted down, my sword to draw,
I hacked him in pieces sma',
I hacked him in pieces sma',
A' for her sake that died to me."

And then, as he drew near the Rous Pass, the tones died away in softer strain: he almost sobbed as he repeated the last:

"Oh! girlie fair, beyond compare!
I'll make a garland o' thy hair,
Shall bind my heart for evermair,
Until the day I dee.

I wish my grave were growing green,
A winding-sheet drawn o'er my een,
And I in her white arms lying,
On fair Kirkconnel Lee."

When he came up to the base of the hill, a sudden impulse seemed to cross him; he stopped, turned, and retraced his steps to the road. Then, going by the bridge, he walked to

the garden bank ere approaching the house, and when he came in sight of Esmé's spring, trickling at the foot of the old cross; he rushed towards it. He knelt down and gazed into the pure limpid stream to see if the pebbles were displaced; he parted the grass and ferns round the edge to see if they bore any significance in their luxuriant thickness, but no mark met his search: yet, when he arose, his eye still wandered restlessly; and the sun shining brightly on every crack on the wooden ledge, showed distinctly the bold pencilling on the surface. Normal saw it: "Godfrey, Friday night." He read the words over and over again; his face grew paler than it yet had done, and with a savage cry he dashed his foot upon the writing. Where Marchmoram's hand had rested, and where Esmé's lips had pressed, Normal stamped his foot; and stamped with passionate hate: with the heel of his boot he crushed and obliterated all trace of writing: he returned twice, to feel assured he had done so, ere he proceeded to the house. Normal had come to say adieu; he knew to whom—to Ishbel and to Glenbenrough, not to Esmé. Unless he could leave her with the stern last look of indifference, he would not see her to give aught gentler. No chance of parting kiss, even from her he had loved with the concentrated lifelong love of his deep sullen heart, could tempt him. He went to Glenbenrough's study, on his arrival, and hurriedly told him he had come to say farewell: it was a sudden arrangement, but imperative; the day was fixed for leaving Arduashien early in next week. They parted as father and son might do. Glenbenrough, with hand fondly laid upon Normal's shoulder, again and again gave him words of kindly affectioned counsel—parting hopes of sage future promise; while Normal stood before him with downcast head and quivering lip.

"Be true, boy! be earnest and true. Don't forget God or your country; and return to us an honour to your name and the Highlands!"

Ishbel was waiting at the hall door: she thought Normal would be with Esmé in the drawing-room, and she wished that her own good-bye should be the last scene. Even with Ishbel, Normal determined to guard against emotion: she might tell her sister of his weakness, if shown to her. But as Ishbel, holding his hand, and pouring out sobs and fond farewells, walked with him to the foot of the Roua Pass, the warm, pent-up flood burst forth, and in a few burning tears he *let fall, his nature triumphed.*

"Good-bye, dearest Ishbel! Don't forget Normal, who has been your brother for so long. Write to me, Ishbel—my own dear, true, little Ishbel! and, when on the summer nights you are singing, 'My heart's in the Highlands,' think of me: mine will be ever there. Ishbel, I'll return some day."

He pressed her to his heart, and turned up the Rona Pass: no parting word left for Esmé. But it came at last: looking backwards for a moment, he cried,

"Tell Esmé, I hope she will like England, and be happy!" then, dashing away a rising tear, he walked swiftly on.

Once again he stopped, when on the very verge of the Pass, and took a parting view. Oh! how vividly, long afterwards, did he recall the spot, and remember it ever after. The old house beneath, the singing, dancing river, the old trees, and the older hills, all the old associations recalled by them, blended as in mist together. On he strode again, that stern young Celt, with clenched hands, and a conquering, scornful feeling for the world he was about to enter.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE HIGHLAND SHEPHERD'S FATE.

The snow was so deep,
That his heart it grew weary,
And he sank down to sleep
In the moorland so dreary.—HOGG.

It gars the life-blood quicker run,
It fills the heart wi' glee,
It brings the rose tint to the cheek,
The sparkle to the e'e.—CURLER'S SONG.

WINTER set in at Glenbenrough with great severity in the month of January, just after Esmé and Ishbel, with their father, returned from Strathshielie, where a large party had kept New Year with Highland honours and unabated spirit for nearly a fortnight after its entrance. They congratulated themselves on having arrived at home, for the snow-flakes began silently to fall so fast and thick, that twelve hours' delay would have made the road almost impassable. Snow fell almost uninterruptedly for a week, until the whole face of the country was *wrapped in the white winding-sheet of nature's death-like sleep; and then hard frost set in: yet the air felt warmer than it had*

done for weeks, for the slight breeze that occasionally shook their snowy burthen from the trees, blew from the west. Beautiful it was to stand at the open window and gaze upon the scene: the snow lay deep in a wide unstained expanse of glittering whiteness, far as the eye could reach, over hill and glen and forest; varied by shades and tints of diverse beauty, as the sun's rays gave a warm glow to the snowy waste, and cast long shadows of the trees. Groups of silvery-frosted birch hung drooping their long-veiled heads like frozen brides, and serried ranks of stalwart pines reared their snowy crests in bold relief against a wintry sky of ethereal blue, without a flake or rack of cloud; while younger pines, crowding near, brightened the old brown neutral tints with foliage of dark green. The high peak of the rocks glittered like icy spears in the sunshine, and cast their jagged shadows upon the lower jutting crags. Death-like stillness reigned over all; but it was the stillness of nature's repose—of the hybernation of the frost-bound earth; and not without indications of the future awakening of vegetable life.

Esmé and Ishbel had been kept within doors for some days by the continual fall of snow, which had blocked every road and path near; but on the first day of frost they prepared to sally out with all the impatience generated by past imprisonment. Glenbenrough having, at breakfast time, wondered if Huistan, the shepherd, had attended to a flock of young ewes which, before the snow began, were wintering in a deep glen a long way off, the girls said they would go to Lochandhu, and ask Florh about it; so off they set, wrapped in their plaids, with their short linsey skirts, and each with a long stick in her hand, in case they encountered any obstacle. The Roua Pass was now impassable; for who would dare to try its narrow width, concealed as it was in treacherous snow, which lay so thick that the whole surface of the hill, from top to bottom, seemed to slope without any indentation. Esmé and Ishbel walked with elastic activity, the rarity of the atmosphere stimulating them to a bounding pace, and sending light into their eyes and brilliant colour to their cheeks. The snowy surface was thickly crusted; but they passed quickly and carefully over it, for a false step would have plunged them into deep yielding wreaths of snow.

Florh was delighted to see them; and Ewen, who was seated moodily by the fire, showed more open pleasure than usual. As Florh had feared, he had done little good since Normal's

departure, but had kept much to the fireside, spending his time in sedentary occupation. He was just now engaged in alternately shaping a piece of wood into an otter, and polishing a pair of pistols which Normal had left, with other things, in his care. Huistan was without, but would be in presently: and Florh began, with busy alacrity, to prepare luncheon for her dear young ladies. She roasted eggs in the peat ashes, fried slices of mutton ham, and mixed rich cream, eggs, sugar, and whisky into a delicious compound, called "old man's milk." Esmé asked her about Jeanie Cameron, when Ewen left the room: Florh told her that she and Ewen had had no further interviews; but that she had heard Jeanie was going, whenever the weather permitted, to visit an aunt in the town of Braemorin, as Jeanie had had a "heavy cold" all winter, and her father thought her very "dwining." Esmé, taking up one of Normal's pistols, saw her own name scratched, in a rude way, upon the stock: she recollected the day she had done it with a pin, after Normal had given her some lessons in firing at a mark; and that he had seemed anything but displeased at the disfigurement.

"It's me that misses Normal, och hone!" said Florh, as she eyed Esmé with the pistol, while busily preparing her hospitable repast.

"And so we all do, Florh," Ishbel replied; "I wish he was home again."

"An' I'm afraid that day won't shine for some time yet," answered Florh.

"Why did you not ask Normal to take Ewen with him, Florh?" Ishbel said.

"I wanted it, Ishbel, methal, but I had not the luck to succeed: Normal went against me in it."

"Oh! if you had persevered, I am sure Normal would have taken him," Ishbel replied: "you know you always can succeed in what you like, Florh."

"No, Ishbel, ma guil, the luck has gone through other wi' me this year: there's nothing happened but disappointment and harm. Normal should never have needed to go away. Who knows but his fate may gang all astray! He left his ain land with a dreeful heart."

"Well, Florh!" said Esmé, "you must have patience. I am very glad Normal went abroad; he will enjoy himself very much, and travelling will be a good thing for him in every way."

While they were seated at Florh's smoking table, the wind

began suddenly, and, at first almost inaudibly, to blow, accompanied by drifting showers of sleety snow. The girls looked up in dismay at the sky,—bright blue but half an hour ago, now completely overcast by an ominous leaden hue. The wind rose into a few loud wailing blasts that almost shook the cottage, and then died quietly away; while the snow drove straight down in small feathery particles, that fell with blinding velocity and thickness. Ere the wind quite ceased, Huistan entered with Ewen, who had gone up to the sheep fank in search of him; both their plaids were encumbered by deep folds of snow, and it lay like a thick thatch upon the top of their Kilmarnock bonnets. Huistan's steady face was in unusual excitement; he scarce waited to salute the young ladies, ere he hurriedly addressed his mother:

"Mither, I must be off to Glen Madhu! A *feeding* storm is coming on here, and has been at it all night up there. I must see can the ewies be driven to the hill fank yonder, puir beasties." And then turning to Esmé: "Will ye tell the laird o' t, Miss Esmé? I was na going till the morn; but I see now no time can be lost. I was up all night on Ben Dollo: the wedders are all safe, and Sandie Mac Tavish and Tam Mac Gillivray are to stop in the bothy."

"Had not you better go too, Ewen?" Esmé said.

"Na, na," Huistan interrupted; "he must stay here to get ye baith safe hame, Miss Esmé, an' to be at hand for fear my mither will want him. I'll be hame by the morn. Hie! Conas and Freuchen—gude collies—hie to the ewies!" His two shepherd dogs wagged their tails, and looked in the direction of Glen Madhu: they knew as well as he did where they were going, and how much they were needed. Florh hastily cut off a lump of cheese, and crammed it, with some oat-cake, into Huistan's pocket; she filled a flask with whisky, which she also put in, and then she pulled a dry plaid that hung upon a nail, and was going to take off the snowy one he had on. But Ewen grumbled and objected. It was his Sabbath plaid: "was there no worse one to give?" Huistan, with a laugh, told him to keep it: the climbing of the hills would make him warm without it; and, wrapping his damp plaid about him again, he set off with his faithful dogs. The storm was, indeed, a "*feeding*" one; there was no wind or drift, but the snow fell so thick and continuously, that in a few hours the present depth was fearfully increased. Esmé and Isht declared they could wait no longer; so Florh and Ewen

ready a little conical-shaped cart, called a *lobahn*, used in the Highlands for carrying turf over morass and mossy tracts ; and in this—covered up with Ewen's best plaid—they proceeded, he leading the steady old hill pony by the head. Scarcely had they got upon the road beyond the flat at the loch, when, with a wild shriek, the winds seemed to rise together from every point, and meet midway in the sky above. Before the travellers could well remark it in words, the weather changed its aspect ; the snow seemed to dash itself enraged into their faces, and hurtled with the blast in eddy whirlpools in the air. The previous light-formed depths rose from the ground like swelling, frothing waves ; and the storm-gust blew with fury, bringing down overwhelming drifts from the surrounding hills. The girls crouched down in the rude cart, and Ewen crept as far beneath it as the cumbrous wheels permitted. The pony, in its sagacity turning round to leeward, held its head lowered to the storm ; which increased momentarily until it reached its wildest, loudest height. Any conveyance less low and solid than the *lobahn* would have been lifted up and carried bodily before it ; but the cart merely rocked and groaned in the blast, while the girls kept silence within. The tempest slackened after a while, and the winds went moaning back to the hills ; there to recruit and come forth again by-and-by with redoubled strength. The pony, at the first lull in the storm, plunged forward, and made for Lochandhu. Ewen urged it on with every expression of Gaelic encouragement ; for the sooner they could regain his mother's cottage the better : to attempt to go on to Glenbenrough was, indeed, impracticable for them ; though Ewen did it by himself a little later. The winds were still lulled when they reached Lochandhu ; but the snow, resuming its former course, came down thick and blindingly, and the girls were half buried beneath it as they sat in the cart. When they had gone in, Ewen unyoked and mounted the pony, and rode off to tell at Glenbenrough of the young ladies' safe detention there ; but he did not return that night to tell of it ; for ere he reached the house, the tempest came on with renewed violence : it was one of the most fearful nights ever remembered in that part of the country. Sheep were rolled over, and entombed in gullies on the hills ; the stones loosened on the walls of the fanks, were hurled in upon the suffering brute creatures that sought their shelter ; the small stacks of hay and straw beside the poor peasants' *unsteads* were thrown down, and blown ruthlessly to de-

struction ; and many a hill cottage home was saved from the same fate only by the antagonistic weight of the snow, which drove against, and formed solid outer walls for the blast to blow upon. In some cottages, high above the raving of the winds, might be heard the untuneful voices of the terrified inmates, rising to the stormy heavens in a psalm of supplication, as the darkness and the peril increased ; their sense of danger being quickened by the fear of the frozen torrents giving way and coming down upon them in *spates*, carrying away their live stock or farming implements.

Florh had given up her bed, with her fine linen sheets and best blankets upon it, to Esmé and Ishbel, and sat wakeful by the glowing fire ; for no one might think of sleep. Every plank in the house creaked, as if in a storm-tossed ship at sea ; and the wind, blowing down the chimney, sent the ashes swirling from the hearth. As the night wore on, the maternal heart of Florh went back to her son Huistan, out upon the hills. Yet upon the hills he scarce could be—at least not in life—unless he were in the shelter of some deep cave, with his faithful dogs huddled close upon his body keeping it in living warmth. She moaned and ejaculated the live-long night, her thoughts wandering, and expressing themselves aloud. “ Och hone ! och hone a rie ! my son Huistan, where are ye ? where are ye ? Ye’re my firstborn bairn, an’ were your father’s darling ! Why did I loe Ewen the better ? Ewen never received father and mither’s kiss on one cheek, tyne the other : he’s the bairn o’ my lanely life, but ye were the toddling joy o’ us both thegither.”

“ Don’t be frightened, Florh,” Ishbel would say, looking out upon her from the darkness ; “ Huistan is such a strong man, he would gain shelter in spite of the storm.”

“ Huistan is safe in the bothy on Ben Madhu, just now, I hope, Florh,” Esmé added, as they tried to turn her from fear into hopefulness : “ the storm did not become so violent until long after he had left.”

“ Aye, bairn ; but you don’t know that Huistan, I hae always thought, wad die for the sake o’ his duty : he wad help the bit ewies wi’ his ain life ; it’s his nature.” And then relapsing into soliloquy, she continued, “ Oh, Huistan ! I hae had your winding-sheet ready in my kist, an’ Ewen’s, an’ my ain this mony a day ; but I do na wish now that yours would be the first ! ”

“ Florh, what beautiful sheets these are,” Ishbel said in a nervous tone ; “ are they your own spinning ? ”

But Florh only continued her own train of thought, and thrilled the girls by singing a verse of mournful lament, her voice wailing fitfully with the rise and fall of the rhythm.

“White were the sheets
And embroidered the cover,
But his sheets are more white
And his canopy grander,
And sounder he sleeps
Where the hill foxes wander.
Och hone ! och hone a rie !”

“Do, dear Florh, sing a hymn,” Ishbel said faintly ; “it would be better than that.”

It might be near the dawn, but the snow still fell so thick and so blocked up the window, it was almost impossible to guess correctly, when Florh fell into a troubled sleep on her seat before the fire. Esmé was also beginning to dream, when a faint sound at the door aroused her into wakefulness again. The wind had died away latterly, and the low wailing voice they now heard was not that proceeding from it : there was evidently some one, or something, seeking to get in.

Ishbel whispered to Esme, “Oh ! what can it be ? Don’t let Florh hear it ; she will think it is a warning.”

They both sat up, and an awful feeling chilled their blood, when the unearthly cry ceased on a sudden, and something outside sprang up against the latch and scratched violently at the door. Esmé now did not hesitate, but, getting out of bed, noiselessly undid the door ; a mass of snow falling into the room from the leaden thatch as she did so. A rough, whitened dog bounded in, and then fell upon the floor. The noise woke Florh. It was Conas, Huistan’s dog ; but scarcely discernible : his bristly red coat was covered with snow, and his intelligent eyes seemed glazing in death as he turned them mournfully on Florh, and stretched him on his side, his tongue lolling out thirstily at its full length. Florh put her finger to her mouth, and whispered,

“Don’t speak, don’t speak ! if ye do ye’ll excite him, and the spark o’ life will fly. He’s fair done : he has come a weary travel wi’ news to us : he must na die till I hear ’t.”

With eyes averted from the dog, she raked the fire together, and hastily heated some milk ; she then poured whisky into a basin, and, kneeling down, lifted the poor collie’s numbed and nerveless feet, and dipped them into it ; rubbing the region of

its heart until, the snow melting from its coat with the warmth, it lay in a pool of water. She next dragged it back, and laid it in a dark, dry corner; then, putting the milk before it, she for the first time addressed the animal in an authoritative tone, desiring it to drink. The poor dog feebly put out his tongue and tried to lap from where it lay, and, after a few mouthfuls, she poured the rest down his throat. Conas seemed reviving: he made a staggering attempt to rise, and gave a low howl; but Florh struck him on the head and, in Gaelic, forbade him at his peril to move. He lay down again, casting mute, wistful glances; but Florh stood before him, and, having ordered him to lie there in silence, she moved away. The girls were watching the scene with intense interest, and admired Florh's presence of mind. The animal had evidently come a long and perilous journey, and brought news from Huistan; but no one there could have acted on any intelligence: they must wait till Ewen's arrival from Glenbenrough before anything whatsoever could be done; and the dog was so nearly exhausted, that any certain good from him as guide must depend on his life being sustained by rest and quiet. Florh made some oatmeal porridge and milk in about half an hour, and again desired the animal to partake; and this time he sat up and ate it all.

As morning advanced, the girls and Florh stood at the cottage door and looked out. The snow had ceased to fall, as well it might; it had so deeply covered the earth that the shapes of the hills were altered beneath it: they rose in smoothened masses, with curving outlines, against the wintry sky; the hollow of the loch beneath was filled, almost to a level with the threshold where they stood; the very hills seemed to have found a snowy grave. While Florh was preparing tea for breakfast, Conas suddenly rose from his corner; already he had resumed his own brisk, wiry aspect, and he now went to the door sniffing uneasily, then returned to Florh and gazed in her face with a look of entreaty almost human in its expression. She shook her head and groaned, and prayed for Ewen's return. The dog's impatience increased in a few minutes: he whined and scratched upon the floor with his paws, and ran to and fro from the table to the door. She, shortly after, rose up too and ran to the door. A cavalcade was in sight, coming in the direction from Glenbenrough. It was the laird himself, mounted on one of the farm horses with Ewen, the grieve, and gamekeeper, all riding: the how

on which rode the two latter, were intended for Esmé and Ishbel to ride home. The snow plough had also been put in requisition from the house to the bridge, and a considerable way beyond. Scarcely had Glenbenrough been welcomed by his daughters, ere they and Florh changed his purpose by telling him of their fears for Huistan.

"Ye see, laird," Florh exclaimed, "he may be in the bothy on the height o' Ben Madhu; an' if so, he's safe enough, wi' meat an' wi' whisky in his pocket: but sitting the lone hours o' night, I hae calculated it and doubt it. The storm was hours in advance up yonder o' us here, an' he wad have been no time arrived in Glen Madhu when the worst drift, that came on here later, wad be down upon him there. The dumb collie tells ye to go to your brither," Florh cried excitedly, turning to Ewen. "Bide no a moment longer!"

"I was going without your word," Ewen returned, sullenly: "the collie dog did no come here for nothing."

"We'll all go. Stop!" exclaimed Glenbenrough. "Grieve, take the horse, you'll go quicker on it, and get down before us to Sandie Cameron's house, and turn out him and his two sons: let them take their light spades; and give us yours, Florh; and put whisky in the flasks. We'll ride as far as Drasky Craig, lads, by the road, leave the beasts there, and keep up by the heights, and come down first upon Ben Madhu bothy. Girls, you'll stay here until my return."

"That we will, papa!" Esmé and Ishbel exclaimed, delighted at the energy which planned the right course and carried it into immediate action. The grieve was scarcely out of sight, awkwardly lumbering and plunging on the straining horse through the deeply snowed road, when the laird with Ewen and the gamekeeper were after him. Ewen, by Florh's advice, held Conas in awkward durance on the saddle before him, until Drasky Craig should be reached. It was not until upwards of four hours after they left Lochandhu that the laird and his men came upon the roof of the bothy on Ben Madhu. They had scrambled painfully and wearily along the mountain summits, from where they had left the horses on the road beneath, half an hour's ride from Lochandhu: and, but for the instinct which guided them, the whole party might have lain buried in some of the deep gullies intersecting the hills, and *sheeted* deceitfully over by the drifted snow. The bothy was *built against* a projecting rock; and none but those who *knew the exact stoq* through all its altered bearings, could discover it.

now. It was completely hid in the snow, and even the wicker door blocked to the top. They had marked their way by shrill shouts and whistles; but had never gained a response; all was stillness save the occasional dull flap of a startled grouse or ptarmigan, as it rose and flew heavily from the snow. Sound must have been Huistan's sleep if he heard them not now, were he within the bothy, as they shovelled the snow from the entrance; but the laird and Ewen both felt already sure he was not there, and Conas's impatience alone betrayed it; he ran on in advance, as if to descend the hill, and whined and moved uneasily while they entered the bothy. It was utterly deserted, and the damp and burnt-turf odour smelt like a vault. The men looked at each other and shook their heads, muttering, "Och, och, Huistan voch!" and Glenbenrough, putting his hand across his eyes, said in a shaken voice,

"My good Huistan! oh, too good and faithful!"

Ewen drew his bonnet over his eyes, and turned his face from the others: his nature never liked to show itself where tenderness might be revealed. But the most hardening of griefs was stealing over him: he thought he would be a wronged man if he now lost brother as well as love. They rested for a few moments, and debated how to proceed; the evening was already beginning to fall, and to be benighted there would be dreary and dangerous. Suddenly a sound rose above their voices, and sent them out hurriedly to the open door: the howl of a dog came clear and piteously from the glen below.

"Coming, Conas, coming!" cried Ewen, as he stumbled forward down the hill. Glenbenrough was at his side, and the others followed with more habitual tardiness. The dog was in sight: he lay at the foot of a mound of snow, unstained and unruffled, from which something of a reddish colour protruded. Conas lay with his head thrown back, wailing unceasingly until they approached. Ewen reached the spot first, and exclaiming, "There lies Freuchen, buried!" began to throw off the snow, until the stiffened body of the dog lay visible. Suddenly Glenbenrough uttered a cry of distress. Ewen started back, and rushing from the spot, sat him down in the snow some distance off: he knew what still lay there. Freuchen had died while scratching the ever-falling snow from off his master's body: his paws were frozen in the snow wreath, which as it formed, he had aye kept scratching off from the cold face beneath. This was his part, while the other dog, in his instinct

went home for further help. With eyes closed in painless slumber, and hands crossed in prayer upon his breast, the faithful shepherd lay; his sunburnt face had waxed white as the surrounding evening-tinted snow, and the strong-made limbs that had borne him over every hill and glen around, were stark now; never more would he tread his native heather, or bow in prayer upon the solitary mountain heights. When the last plaid was wound round the frozen body, Ewen came forward, and, without word or comment, placed his shoulder with the others beneath the stiffened corpse, and so helped to carry his only brother along. Glenbenrough walked first, and maintained deep silence also. Three times did Conas stop the cavalcade, in the intuitive sagacity of his species, as he came upon a wreath underneath which a sheep still breathed—known by the small circular spot made on the surface by the warm breath of the sheep buried beneath; unassisted, the sagacious animal dug them out, and drove them on to the sheep fank, which the mournful bearers passed about a mile from where Huistan had lain him down. As they passed, they whispered, “See; he saved nigh all the ewies first! There they are, housed within the fank! It was his last journey to drive the very last o’ them into safety, when the blast came down upon himself. Och Huistan voch!” And the laird, as he heard the bleating of the shepherdless sheep from their shelter, mournfully exclaimed, “Huistan, I would have given all my flocks for your life.”

When they came to Sandie Cameron’s house, about a mile from Lochandhu, they halted. Ewen and Glenbenrough pressed on, to break to Florh the afflicting visitation; also, the laird desired to get Esmé and Ishbel home from the house of death. They sobbed more for Huistan than did his mother: it is not the way among the Highland lower classes; but her grief took vent in wild Gaelic apostrophe, and passionate demonstration of gesture. “My bairn! my bairn! an’ was the snow wreath your winding-sheet? an’ the dumb collie your dying mourner? How hae ye been cut off with a stroke, and departed for ever from your mither an’ your countrie! Gae bring him in, till I make my moan on my eldest son. I didna prize him sufficient afore. Oh, Ewen, Ewen! ye’re the only one now. Oh! *dinna* never gae break your mither’s heart. Can ye be to me as eldest and youngest son? Gae, get ye gone for my brave Huistan, wha was an earthly gude shepherd and gave his life for his charge. Bring him in, till I cry for his loss—cry *ma*,

cry sair! I am wearied and tentless now for my eldest son!"

The snow was falling fast and gloomily as the girls reached home, and the rising winds had been muttering fierce threats of speedy outbreak from the hills, as, with a man at the head of each horse, they had made their way in the gathering darkness of evening from Lochandhu to Glenbenrough. More than once had they been dismounted by the headlong plunge of the horse, but thrown always harmlessly on the soft-piled snow; and, by the time the house was reached, excitement, grief, and cold had roughly tried the buoyant, but fine-strung frames of the Highland girls. Glenbenrough was so grieved and shocked at Huistan's loss, that he retired to his study, and the girls took tea in their own room.

The impression of Huistan's sad wintry death did not wear off with them for long. Florh received the utmost sympathy of their hearts in this trial, while Glenbenrough marked his in many substantial ways. He installed Florh rent free at Lochandhu, and gave her Huistan's saved earnings (which he had always lodged with the laird), with very large interest added. He also defrayed the costs of Huistan's funeral; which took place on a scale sufficient to gratify even the pride of Florh and Ewen on this point: for this is one of the most honoured ceremonies in the Highlands. The laird acted as chief mourner, with mother and son, and put up a tablet to the memory of his faithful servant, in the little churchyard on the banks of Loch Monach. When spring advanced, Ewen alone, and without opinion or approval asked from any other, built a cairn on the lonely spot where his brother died: he piled the upper stones into such a sharp conical form that no succeeding snows of winter ever rested upon the top, in obliteration of the rugged monument to the faithful shepherd in gloomy Glen Madhu.

CHAPTER XX.

TIDINGS FROM ENGLAND.

Thus with delight we linger to survey
 The promised joys of life's unmeasured way;
 Thus, from afar, each dim discovered scene
 More pleasing seems than all the past hath been ;
 And every form that fancy can repair
 From dark oblivion glows divinely there.

CAMPBELL'S Pleasures of Hope.

THE sadness which the mournful event of Huistan's death had thrown over the household of Glenbenrough was relieved by the news constantly communicated by Norah of her visit to Fairleigh Park. Norah wrote very long letters, such as only sisters write to each other, to Esmé and Ishbel, who read them aloud to their beloved father, as he sat before the evening fire warming his open hands at the flame of the resinous native pine, the genial glow of his kindly nature brightening his listening face, as he smiled or interposed gay comment. Norah ought to have been very happy at Fairleigh Park, for it was a luxurious, delightful house, and Sir Henry and Lady Lauriston were more than kind. Lady Lauriston, to good sense and a bright, straightforward disposition, united thoughtfulness for every one, and had the happy art of combining comfort with discipline, and Sir Henry, with his easy temper, enjoyed life without a shadow.

Norah wrote descriptions of all the neighbouring places and people, characterizing the scenery and people as alike rich, cultivated, and agreeable, but rather flat.

Esmé well knew that the one element was wanting, without which the happiness or pleasures of Elysium would not have satisfied ; and as she opened each successive letter, her eye would instinctively seek for Harold's name ; at last it appeared. Quite at the end of one of her letters, Norah wrote, "I noticed a paragraph in the local paper here last night, announcing the arrival of Mr. Harold at his place, which is about fifteen miles from hence : I wonder if we will ever meet ! People think more of distance in this part of the world than they do in the Highlands."

Norah's next letter contained more satisfactory particulars.

"Mr. Harold has been here," she wrote : "he called the day before yesterday, and spent all the afternoon here, and the

Henry and Lady L. asked him to dine yesterday, when he came. He has been in London transacting some business since he left the North. Mr. Marchmoram and Mr. Auber are there, also, just now. I asked Mr. Harold a great deal about the latter, dear Esmé. He says Mr. Auber has been engaged in a large lawsuit, which, if he gains it, will give him another property in another county (the name of his place is Emersant Park, in Devonshire); but as it is still, and will be for some time, undecided, he talks of going abroad, and spending the winter at Rome. I knew by Mr. Harold's face, when he was speaking of Mr. Auber, that he thought of you, Esmé darling! and he looked uncomfortable: he spoke with a sort of restraint, quite different from the way in which he mentioned Mr. Marchmoram. Esmé, dearest, don't let yourself think about this Mr. Auber. He is a man who will always take care of his own peace; and do you take care he does not quite wreck yours."

Nearly ten days elapsed ere Norah wrote again, and then she spoke more fully.

"Fairleigh Park.

"MY OWN DEAR ESME AND ISABEL,

"I sit down to have a long chat with you both, and can write uninterruptedly, for Sir Henry and Lady Lauriston have gone to call at Brittonberg Castle, which is about fourteen miles from here, in the opposite direction from Harold's Hall, and they have taken Julia with them. I have some news to give which I think will interest you both.

"A few days after I wrote last, a note came from Mr. Harold inviting Sir H. and Lady L., Julia and myself, to dine, and meet the duke and Lady Ida, who were staying there; accordingly on Thursday evening, at half-past six o'clock, we left, and reached Harold's Hall by eight. You will like to hear of our dresses: I wore my gold-coloured silk (which you have never seen) and made up a wreath of holly, spiked with snowberries, in our own fashion. Julia wore pale blue silk, with Christmas roses, and looked very pretty: a dress that would have suited you, Esmé. It being dark ere we reached the Hall, I cannot describe the outward appearance of the house, which is on a very large scale; but the approach was up an avenue of grand old elms, and in the park, which extends for miles, are some magnificent oaks of great age. The spacious suite of reception rooms were all lighted up, and the effect was splendid. Mr. Harold was the same as host at the head of that grand dining-table, as he was sitting beside the glowing turf fire &

Dreumah, only a little less free and lively, as if his duties as host made him more grave. Mr. Harold took Lady Mornden into dinner, and Lady Ida sat on his right hand: and who, think you, took her? (Here Esmé's eyes, as she read, were dimmed for a moment.) Mr. Marchmoram! I was so surprised and so glad to see him in the crowd of gentlemen: for you may imagine I felt inwardly not a little shy. He has gone to Brittonberg to-day; and he is to stand for the borough of Lillsdale, a most important seat. The duke's interest goes with Mr. Marchmoram, and since I came here I have heard much of his talent; they say that the duke, since his accession to office, has strongly desired the co-operation of Mr. Marchmoram, and himself proposed his standing for Lillsdale.

"The conservatory at Harold's Hall is very beautiful, and Mr. Harold himself gathered me a lovely bouquet of exquisite heaths in the evening; and, to please Mr. Harold, I sang a few of our Highland airs; but Lady Ida's manner prevented my attempting anything more: it was too condescending to suit my Highland blood. Dear Esmé, I think she would rouse the hot blood into your cheek too, merely by her own coldness; and her manner to myself does not please me at all: even Mr. Harold reddened as he overheard the supercilious way in which she deigned to cross-question me as to Glenbenrough. Mr. Marchmoram was near me at the time; and his face twitched, and those strange lights in his eyes began to play when Lady Ida spoke to me as she did. The weight of public life seems already pressing heavily upon him: he was silent and absent; rarely spoke to any lady, and even his manner to myself I thought strange. He sat down frequently beside me; but never once spoke freely of home.

"Is papa busy just now? Tell him that when he comes for me, he must come in good time, that we may enjoy ourselves here together; and he must be at his leisure all the time. Mr. Harold wishes us to spend a day at Harold's Hall this week, so that I may see it by daylight. Fondest love and kisses: and ever, dearest Esmé and Ishbel, believe in the affection of

"Your loving sister,

"NORAH."

CHAPTER XXI.

A WOUNDED HEART AND A BROKEN BONE—MISS CHRISTY'S WILL.

A moment to ponder—a season to grieve,
The light of the moon—the shadows of eve.—MOIR.

O ! how can I to that lady ride,
Wi' saving o' my dignitie ?—SCOTT.

THE storms and snowdrifts of January had brought busy times and duties. There were jovial gatherings in many a Christmas Highland home, amongst blithe-hearted lairds and ladies ; and, alas ! as winter protracted its severity, there was much destitution amongst the poor people fasting on distant snowy heights. Then was the time for the willing hearts and hands of Glenbenrough and of other places, who would hear the cry of hunger from many a hill-side hamlet, and see the miserable stock of fodder diminish daily, the starving, ill-fed cow refuse her nourishing milk—when the oatmeal and the potatoes, produce of their arable crofts, were finished ; basket and girmel emptied out ; and nought left to live by, save the warmth from their goodly stacks of peat, the only produce of the sterile land which grew uncultivated and without stint for them. Then was the time when Glenbenrough used to send bounties of meal, corn, and fodder from his own well-managed stores. Then, fighting against sudden showers of blinding sleet and rain, climbing painfully the slippery, rugged mountain path, might Esmé and Ishbel themselves be seen carrying hot soup, or strengthening wine, to some worn-out Highland widow, crooning hungrily over the unused fire in her smoky, snow-covered hovel. The gamekeeper's gun, bringing down the destructive ravenous hares that made inroad on the garden banks, would nightly wake the echoes ; and the cauldron, filled with their seething flesh, steaming daily under charge of his wife, would give nourishing food to the children, who waited daily with their little pitchers for a supply.

A change had come over Esmé : her mental state was the reverse of the outward course of nature. During the quiet clear days of approaching winter the storm raged wild within her breast ; and then, as the tempest-driven snow of the outer world came hurrying wildly on, her inner being stilled daily *more and more*, until the beautiful calm of a sunset sky prevailed. Esmé found peace of mind, in so far that self-

regulation was given, at last to the struggling, praying. At first, and for months, she could not save herself from the baneful influence of the associations that everywhere met her. Marchmoram's foot had trod where even he had wandered; the same heather had bent beneath the tread of each; his voice had awoken the echoes of all the distant hills; his lips had drunk from the water of her favourite stream; even the midnight darkness of her room was penetrated by the fancied shade: there—even there—had he stood. She would start from her sleep and listen breathlessly for the distant voice. What was this come over her? what had he done to her? haunting, dreaming, fearful infatuation. Those eyes met her everywhere; that voice, that look, made her sigh and sigh, waking and sleeping, and caused sudden smiles and tears. One guessed why—or the unbidden tear, as she sat pensive and absent, busy in memory's scenes. And even another rose to her memory; he who had made her taste the hours of intellectual rapture—he who had first opened to her the springs of thought, leading on the bright current of sparkling swift-ness, until it gained volume enough to sweep into a nobler region and wider scope, and rushed into the chambers of Marchmoram's strong heart.

There was no help for Esmé in her own unassisted state; it was but weakness. The only cure came at last: a small, old, dark-bound volume, too long neglected by her, fell into Esmé's trembling feverish hand. She wandered to the hills, wrapped in her hooded tartan plaid, indifferent to the rising northern winds, and there she sat with the book opened. The sun lit up the pages as she read and pondered, and,—oh wonderful! passing belief, save to those who had similar experience—here she found her ease: in the Bible she found it. For in this blessed book there was the form of human feeling, no subtle tendency of the human mind, which has not its record and its antidote. Here she found strength and comfort.

A month or so after Huistan's death, Esmé spent some time with Miss Christy Mac Pherson who had broken her fall falling on the ice on the farm pond of Phee, which she had scientifically probing with a red-hot poker, to ascertain the thickness of the frozen surface. She was carried home by the "bone-setter" sent for. This functionary general, who in the northern country parishes, supersedes (and supremely ignores) the legitimate surgeon or doctor: repudiating all

theories, from the circulation of the blood downwards, he proceeds invariably in the ancient treatment, as handed down to him by his ancestors, who lived and fought, cured and suffered, in the times when curative tortures (such as pouring boiling oil into gun-shot wounds) were commonly practised. The bone-setter of the parish of Phee diversified his profession by following also that of a country blacksmith, as being the most in unison with his higher craft; great strength of muscle being required to twist properly the limbs of his sturdy Highland patients. Poor Miss Christy being an especial favourite, and an important patient of high rank, came in for Mr. Donald Mac Caw's most complicated ingenuity of treatment. He first had the poker which had caused the accident heated again red-hot, and this he brandished over her leg until she yelled with the pain; when the limb was sufficiently inflamed, he took to his manual practice, and dislocated, and rubbed, and knit and unknit the bone, in the most frightful manner; finishing, as a soother, with putting a huge poultice of butter and oatmeal upon it, and prescribing a strong tumbler of toddy to keep down fever and ensure sleep. Fever very soon set in, however, and under its influence she one day suddenly "went out of her mind;" for thus he apologetically accounted for the symptoms that followed. Mr. Donald Mac Caw had just been applying the gentle stimulant of switching the leg with a bunch of dry holly, when Miss Christy started up with such sudden vigour as nearly to throw him backwards; and, seizing the holly, ere he could recover himself, she laid it with such hearty vengeance about his brawny cheeks, accompanied by several sound boxes on the ear, that he roared again for mercy.

"Hout tout, Donald Mac Caw! Do ye ken noo what it is to suffer? Do ye ken noo, man, a tenth part o' the devilry you hae been doing on me! Look at my leg, swelled to the size o' a churn! Is it in your power to tak it doun again? I trow not. I'll tell the laird on ye this very night. Get ye gone out o' my hoose!"

The bone-setter rose up; but, not yet quite crest-fallen, he glanced round the room to see if anything in the shape of a rope was at hand, with which to bind her down as a raving patient. But Miss Christy's wits seemed doubly sharpened under her excitement; she took quiet possession of a large wooden mallet (used for mashing potatoes) and held it in readiness under the blankets, and when Mr. Mac Caw came

blantly towards her, with his hands mysteriously behind back, and something wriggling after him like a thin serpent upon the floor, she waited until he was quite enough, and then felled him with the mallet, shouting,

"Tak ye that; and I hope it'll gie you a brain fever!"

The house of Phee lay encased amidst hills of rock, hea and scattered weeping birch; the roar of the grand river sounded not far off, as it took its foaming course past Phee from the distant Dual Ghu. Miss Christy and her had exhausted all their appliances in preparing a luxu reception for Esmé. Her room was as white as a pr display of Miss Christy's best napery could make it; and from the delicious hill spring was in abundant supply. It a pleasure to concoct wonderful restoratives, in the w original combinations of sago, cream, and calf's-foot jelly to see Miss Christy's newly-awakened epicurean enjoyme them; while Esmé's keen sense of the ludicrous was ke constant play by Miss Christy's delightful peculiarities.

The second night after her arrival, Esmé was sitting re by the light of the turf fire, and fancied Miss Christy dozing, when a low, cracked whisper, proceeding from high-backed sofa on which she lay, proved the contrary.

"Miss Esmé, are ye a clerk at all?"

"A clerk! what's that, Miss Christy?"

"Oh, I mean hae ye any notion of law business, o like? Could you do a clerk's work? I ~~am~~ thinking ye for ye can do anything where your heid's concerned."

"It's at your service as far as it can possibly go, Christy," Esmé said, rising.

"Weel, my dear, ye see I hae just fancied I wad li write my will. None o' us know what may be the ups sickness, an' I hae been decreeing on whom I'd leav little worldly gear; if you'll write it out in lawyer guage."

So Esmé brought her desk and sat down near Miss Cl who began in a solemn tone.

"Write—an' ye must say Amen at the end o' request, Esmé, for that'll legalize it:—Me, Christy pherson, niece o' one James Macpherson o' Phee, and da o' Peter Macpherson, late Tacksman o' Kingrassie, leav devises to her uncle the sum o' three hunder pounds bank at Bracmorin, being the tocher left to her by my r Mrs. Janet Logan, and ten pounds, being luck pennies

self on different sales o' the hogs and grimmers last Martin-
ss. Amen."

"You had better not say that, Miss Christy; it does not
ake it so distinct," Esmé interposed, in a voice choking with
ghter.

"It behoves us to say it. Gae on," responded Miss Christy,
th severity. "And the said Christy Macpherson, having no
nale bluid relation left living in this generation, does be-
eath to Miss Norah Mac Neil, eldest daughter o' the laird,
the napery in the blue press and the yellow-papered kist at
esent in the hoose o' Phee, being her own and her mither's
e late Mrs. Janet Logan's weaving an' property. An' to
iss Esmé Mac Neil I leave and devise the twal pots o' candied
armalade in said blue press, together wi' my three black
urned ewies." Miss Christy here paused for a moment,
lding briskly, "An' wad ye like me to pat in my mither's
arriage gown to you, Miss Esmé? If I thoct, my uncle wad
er take a wife, ye see I wad leave it till her."

"I think it would be better not to mention it here; but
st tell him your wishes about it, Miss Christy: you should
ve it to your uncle, I certainly think!"

"Weel, very weel; gae on." And she resumed her funereal
one. "An' me, Miss Christy Macpherson, devises to Miss
shbel Mac Neil my cairngorm brooch, an' a' the cheeses o' my
n making in the dairy; thegither wi' the picters in my bed-
om. An' to the laird himsel' I gie, wi' my blessing, my twal
lver spoons an' forks, wi' my china tea-set; an' my whole
ore o' brown hill stirks an' heifers, thegither with the wool,
ow at the carding, o' my ain sheep, which I leave to my
ele. This is my bequeathment to the family o' Glenben-
ugh. Amen.

"An' noo, Esmé, do ye mind yon English colonel wha was
re last autumn? I am thinking I was just rather hard on
m, an' I don't like any one in this world to think grudgingly

Christy Macpherson. I'll leave a legacy till him for good-
ill's sake. Write—An' to one Colonel Sternbotham, o'
nglish name and country, the said deviser o' this Will doth
ive her best home-spun royal tartan plaid, in memory o' an
onourable acquaintance o' him, quhilk Miss Christy Mac-
pherson, on her part, did feel great pleasure in, an' o' a
rive, in the which I happed him up in this plaid as now
squeathed.

"An' in like manner she gives and leaves to Mr. Donald

Mac Caw, blacksmith and bone-setter in the parish o' Phee, my grandfather's silver watch, in token o' having forgot the cast-out she had wi' him on this melancholy occasion, and in belief o' his gude intentions in treatment o' myself. Amen.

"Put noo, Miss Esmé: P.S.—An' to the servant lass, Jessie Mac Gregor, Miss Christy Macpherson devises all her body claithes.

"Noo, if ye'll hae the great kindness to get a candle (for we canna do it at the lamp), ye'll seal it an' I'll sign it."

Esmé was glad of the offered escape. She ran out into the frosty moonlight, and, unseen, unheard, enjoyed the laughter which had been inwardly convulsing her; then she went to the homely, bright little kitchen, and, getting a candle from Jessie, returned, gravely composed, to Miss Christy, and finished the Will for her. From that night Miss Christy's recovery was miraculously rapid; and the day that Esmé left for home again, good Miss Christy accompanied her great part of the way; reclining in a Bath-chair, which had been sent from Glenbenrough, and was drawn by the strong servant lass, who kept pace with Suila's walk. Miss Christy's spirits had been raised, and sustained at their highest pitch, by the sunshine of Esmé's society, which fell brightly and warmly upon her.

When Miss Christy said good-bye to Esmé upon the road, after many farewell blessings and thanks for her visit, she called her back for a moment and ended with,

"Tell Miss Norah, when you write, that I am near as well as ever; and (sinking her voice to a whisper) I sent to the merchant's yesterday at the cross roads for a bit o' pink; I am going to new dye my silk stockings: I feel certain sure I'll be dancing at her wedding ere the simmer is out. Oh! but I'll dance my best steps!" and she cracked her fingers merrily.

CHAPTER XXII.

WEDDINGS IN PROSPECT.

A' o' my dreams o' world's guid
 Aye were turned wi' thee,
 But I leant on a broken reed,
 Which soon was ta'en frae me,
 Ta'en frae me.—GAELIC.

Oh! hold your tongue o' your weeping,
 O' your weeping let me be,
 I will show you where the lilies grow
 On the banks o' Italie.—SCOTT.

ROUGH and Ishbel welcomed Esmé back, each with
 ristic warmth; and old Cameron, the butler, testified
 obation of her return by unbiddenly uncorking a bottle
 pagne at dinner, and filling the glasses, exultingly
 with satisfaction when he observed the quiet smile on
 l's face as he proposed, in consequence, the toast of
 health. The post (which arrived irregularly during the
 nonths) brought a budget of letters with the dessert-
 vere, amongst others, two from Norah, and one from
 Lauriston. Some time ago Norah had written an
 of Mr. Marchmoram's triumphant return for Lillsdale,
 brilliant ball given in consequence at Brittonberg
 where Lady Ida had moved and looked a queen amongst
 l. Harold had led Norah through that magnificent
 for which he had presented her with an exquisite
 . Marchmoram, the hero of it, had looked unhappy—
 ely excited and gloomy—and left for London the suc-
 day. The letters received now, arrived after a long
 n, one of seven and the other of five days, on the
 highland road. The first contained the routine of her
 , and of the Lauristons' ever-continued kindness. For
 past Harold's name had held conspicuous place in
 letters: she seemed to meet him constantly, and to
 also very frequently at Fairleigh Hall; but in this his
 as scarcely mentioned, and only incidentally. Esmé
 bel had scarcely time to silently remark this, when
 rough, who was engaged in reading Lady Lauriston's
 himself, exclaimed,
 re is Norah tired of England, after all, and very anxious
 back to us!"

"How, papa?" Esmé said quickly; "she does not say so in her own letter."

"Oh! but read the second; perhaps she does in that. This is what Lady Lauriston says about it, and you see she does not take Norah's views:

" 'Pray be very firm in refusing dear Norah's request, unkind to us; as, for many reasons, I should very much regret her departure: Sir Henry and I feel really the affection of parents for her; and her delightful society has been a great pleasure to us this winter.'

"And so on, she continues," added Glenbenrough. "Now why has Norah formed this sudden wish? she could not have been happier, or enjoyed herself more than she has done!" and he looked puzzled.

"In Norah's second letter, papa, she does not speak so very anxiously about returning,—only proposes it," Esmé replied, as she read aloud the following passage:

"Do you know what a great home sickness has come over me: it has crept on within the last three weeks, and I have now quite a feverish restlessness to return home—to beloved home. Never shall I forget the very great kindness of both Sir Henry and Lady Lauriston, and the happy, happy time I have spent here; but I think my stay in England has been sufficiently protracted. Do ask papa to arrange about my return as soon as he can; not that I cease to be happy here, or am tired of England—I never could be either—but I intensely long to go home again."

"There is one thing certain," said Glenbenrough, "Norah cannot get North at present, while the Highland road is still blocked up: I would not allow her to attempt it; and when the snow melts, the rivers will overflow and make it dangerous. At present, and for some weeks to come, she must remain quiet."

"Norah would have enjoyed so much your going for her; wonder she thinks of giving it up," Ishbel added.

"Yes, this desire of change is not at all like Norah: I can't understand it," Glenbenrough replied thoughtfully.

But Esmé understood it, and she felt impatient to retreat to her own room, where she might quietly read a little missive that had been inclosed in Norah's last letter, and bore the word "Private" on the outside.

"Let me write you, my own dear sister, all I feel and think for 'tis time I did so, and 'tis relief to me: when we meet,

explain all, and seek your sympathy more fully. I only now that I feel very wretched, and am longing to be back in the quiet peace of home: I crave for the bracing open air of the hills. Oh, dear Esmé! I have never written to you of my increasing happiness here; my heart was too full of it to give vent; but now that I see it vanishing—driven away from me—I must tell you, and claim your sympathy.

You know well what my feelings are; but, indeed, they scarcely given due return to those precious, dearly-prized attentions shown of late more and more plainly to me. Indeed, when I believed, and allowed myself to believe, that he loved me, could I doubt it? By every look, word, and attention, he has given me to understand it. We have of late been almost inseparable; and Lady Lauriston at last even forced to give her my confidence: she said it was only confidence she wanted from me, so that we might commune as sisters together (and she is indeed, and has been, as a sister to me), that outward proofs of our attachment had long since been given to both her and Sir Henry: it was impossible to doubt feelings that existed on his part, for they were shown so clearly. Oh! the hours, the days, that I have passed, dearest Esmé! I was too happy. Earth held too great bliss for me: my unworthy, wretched self never deserved to receive such attention in her hands. I only want to get home: while I am here I cannot recover myself. I cannot believe—will not think—of coming over; and yet I am sure it is: I can't stay here in uncertainty. If he still loves me, he will seek me there; but, let me be away from the chance of meeting him with wounded feelings.

I can't yet feel coherently, or at all conjecture what took away from me: it was three weeks ago on Monday. I was at the rectory, and he came too: he was the previous evening at Fairleigh, and he spent it by my side. He talked of the coming spring, of the first opening flowers at Harold's, and of many, many things I can't write here: he spoke of hope and future happiness, of his love for the Highlands, of the fortunate fate which had sent him there last year, to that which all his travels and all England had never shown him before.

We were in the green-house at Mr. Lee's next day; and I lay down amongst the perfume of the flowers; and again he came to me. Oh, Esmé! in words of ecstasy, so true, so honest, so simple: and, though you know my reserve, I am

certain that he felt—he knew what lay beneath it. Mrs. Lee had come into the green-house, and he then altered his plans and talked to me (as he often did) of business and his affairs. He spoke of Lady Ida, and told me she had written him lately from London: he said she was very anxious to get him up to go into Parliament, and he thought he would do so later. He said he admired her talent, but hers was a character that never could influence his, he thought; because he knew it so well: it was so utterly unlovable. Well, a few minutes after this, a servant appeared with a letter, and as the groom had brought it from Harold's Hall, and was in wait, Basil opened it, and, while he was reading, I had risen and begun plucking the dead leaves off an Arum lily. When I turned again, he had risen too: he looked pale, and with a startled expression. He went out; a few moments after he returned, and, saying his horse was in readiness, bade good-bye to Mrs. Lee and myself, and rode away. From that hour to this I have never heard of him again, save indirectly; and which I have heard shows me I had miserably deceived myself in my acquaintance with me, after all, has been but one of friendship! But what else had I right to think of, or expect? I am too quiet to arouse love: I have not the power of fascination; I am merely the calm, the steady friend. Oh, Esme! I thought the cup of earthly happiness had found its way to me; so rarely happens, unadulterated to my lips, and that I might sip and sustain my life in it now to the end: but I deserve not, and God has withdrawn it from me.

"Lady Lauriston sent to Harold's Hall, two days after my departure, for some plants she wished, along with a note of invitation; but it was returned, with a message that Harold had gone to London, and the date of his return was unknown. Well, then we heard he was staying at the house of Brittonberg's, in town, and that he and Lady Ida were inseparable; and the day before yesterday I heard that he was going abroad: he might possibly come down for a day to Harold's Hall, to give some directions, but it was not like

"And so, dear Esmé, let me come home. Lady Ida found the way to influence him, though he thought she would not: now let me get away, so that she may hear it, and that the Highland girl can be as proud as herself. I will not have a melting interview—have no fond farewell.

"Ever your loving, though unhappy,

"NORA

Glenbenrough wrote next day to Lady Lauriston, and also to ; telling the former that he left his daughter quite to her own wishes, and worded his note with all the true old-fashioned polish of his cordial and courteous nature. But (not to interact Norah's desire of returning home at once, should he persevere in it) he told her that he might go to Edinburgh on business, by-and-bye, when the Highland road was open; and that if he thought his detention would be long perhaps it would be advisable that Norah's happy visit should give place to the duty of returning to Glenbenrough, Esmé and Ishbel, being left alone, would daily miss and long for her society. This latter opening of escape, without offence to Lady Lauriston's kind hospitality, he also said to Norah; and she certainly, under any circumstances, would not sooner leave England. Within a fortnight Glenbenrough hoped to be in Edinburgh; and, if she then still desired, he would send Cameron, the old butler, to bring her home. The day succeeding that on which Harold had sat in Mr. Little's greenhouse with Norah, he sat in a different room with a different person. The refreshing coolness and extraordinary natural serenity there were changed for a gorgeous, hot boudoir, large enough to admit of the hasty transit, to and fro, of a flushed and angry woman. Lady Ida, dressed in the most wintry fashion, paced up and down before him in the parlour of the town house: she had sent for him as the only man or person then living to whom she could apply for words of sympathy or advice in her present trouble. With flashing eyes and a flushed neck, Lady Ida spoke, declaiming occasionally with a most haughty gesture of her jewelled hand.

"Basil! Basil! I must prevent it: it shall not be! Shall I let it? Never. Wretched woman! let her take care: crush her beneath my feet—I'll crush her!" and she set her white teeth and pressed her foot firmer as she walked. Harold was very grave and pale: his face wore an expression of deep annoyance.

"Dear Ida, I feel for you with my soul."
 "Yes, you may, you may; but, Basil—oh, my God! the want of sympathy. Shall I be brought under it?—This woman! you know what she is? Dangerous reptile! I took her up for my own purposes, and held her, as I thought, by the terror of my eye; but she slipped further than I knew. And now should I in entrance I must fly: and whither? Oh! Basil, how shall I stoop from my height?"

"Ida, be resolute as you can be; only use tact, and try more gentleness with the duke: be wary, for the danger is very imminent. You must be firm, courageous, but cool. Do not mar the crisis by lack of judgment."

"No, Basil," Lady Ida replied, her lip trembling; "but this miserable, low-minded woman threatens to wreck the plan and work of years."

"She is a bad, a detestable woman! I know it; and every faculty I possess shall aid you in preventing, if possible, the marriage, dear Ida," Harold said, with determination. "I cannot but think that a direct appeal to the duke, temperately, carefully urged, may carry conviction. Go to him, speak gently, affectionately: tell him your conviction that this match is neither for his nor your happiness: exert your own power of calm reasoning. Point out, if you will, the object of this designing, grasping character, which has so insidiously wound its way: paint Lady Jane as you know her, and as you believe her to be—incapable of adding an hour's happiness to his life, and repugnant in every respect to yourself. Speak to him kindly, though with firmness." Lady Ida laughed bitterly.

"I fear 'tis too late to go with gentle words to the duke now, Basil. When first I knew of it, I acted on impulse. I rushed to my father, and with bitter and frantic words I upbraided, taunted, even threatened him! Aye, I told him he would do it at his peril. I told him that never would Lady Ida Beauregard stand second to this Lady Jane Trevor; that if he placed her above me, I would rise in defiance of him and her, and act in opposition to him as long as I lived. Yes, Basil, I reminded him with bitterness of all the years of my early youth, when he, in his selfish egotism, sought forgetfulness of my mother in neglect of me; how unassisted and alone as I may say, my childish character was left to its own natural dictates; and how, when time fitted it, I returned to him good for the evil. I diverted my tastes to suit his; I sharpened my woman's wit to gain victory over rival men for him; I steeled my heart, became cold and calculating, and sacrificed all tenderer feeling, in the belief that, if I remained thus true to him, he would be satisfied with me. And now, selfish—basely selfish—weak, too—he makes me this return. He seeks to separate himself from me by taking to himself one of the meanest instruments I sought and used in furtherance of my schemes for him. He robs me of the position for which I have relinquished all else. Am I not wronged?"

"Yes, Ida," Harold replied. "But had you described temperately to the duke the character of this scheming woman, and used argument against this union—had you shown him the love of a daughter anxious for his happiness, as well as to become sole possessor of his rank and protection—it would have touched his heart; whereas the irritation excited by your reproaches might rouse him into rebellion. Had you not, Ida, sent to me on this emergency, I should have been here to speak to you on a matter touching my own happiness," and Harold's voice, which had been firm before, became slightly faltering.

"What is this, Basil?" asked Lady Ida, her eyes resting steadily on his ingenuous face.

"My own marriage."

"To whom?"

"To Norah Mac Neil. I admired her the first day I saw her in her Highland home: I have loved her for months, and I expect she will bring life-long happiness to my English home."

Lady Ida frowned; but ere she could reply Harold resumed.

"She possesses high principle: she has a fine mind, and a pure and truthful nature; and though she is free from all taint of worldliness, yet she has wit enough to meet it in others."

"Ah! I always feared he would marry thus," thought Lady Ida.

"You will learn to be proud of her, Ida," he continued. "I intended having a conversation with your father on my marriage, he having been my guardian; and until this and other matters were arranged, I determined not to ask Norah to be my wife. I will go to him now, and will try to lead the conversation to the subject that agitates you. I also hope, as you do, that we may prevent his marrying this woman."

"I fear not," Lady Ida said, in her low, deep tone, as her cousin left the room. She went up to the windows looking out upon the square, and angrily drew down the blinds; the light annoyed her: she preferred the twilight, for moody thoughts were coming on. She sat down, and leaned her sharply-cut chin upon her hand, and muttered her thoughts aloud in broken sentences.

"And if he does—if he does, shall I marry too? I will follow him just so far, to prove my superiority in making my choice. I will choose well. Mine will be a masculine, healthy, vigorous character—a strong growing tree, sure to thrive and

spread its branches, aye, till it overshadow — I will show him that when I stoop it is for a purpose; I bend to grasp that which will bring increased force to me. But I will not yet make up my mind," she continued with bitterness. "Marriage — marriage for Ida Beauregard? But for this curse which threatens to blight my prospects, I never would bind myself with that tie! My power has long been felt by Godfrey Marchmoram, and I could have held it over him — have led him on, and made him work with and for me — compelled him, by false hopes, and feigned disdain, to follow me, and dedicate his life to me: but marriage! marriage! no — I am not formed for it. What shall I do if this blow fall upon me? If he marry her, I am driven forth!"

In another part of London, and in a room as luxurious as this in which Lady Ida so gloomily meditated, but furnished to suit different tastes, two men sat in easy conversation. Marchmoram looked older than he did some months before; his strong-marked face lacked the glow of Highland exercise, and the strain of the mental faculties in political warfare had left traces of fatigue, which no mere physical exertion would have caused: he looked jaded and fagged. His eyes burned bright, but their light was lurid, and his brow was contracted: continued late hours and constant working of the brain had told upon his iron frame. Auber was as unchanged as if but an hour had passed since the early October sun had last shone on his parting smile at Glenbenrough; his face had acquired that quiet, yet bland, expression which is the result of a combination of even temper and intellectual complacency, and the *blasé* accomplished man of thirty-six looked rather worn-out.

"Well, Godfrey, defend me from an Italian mistress! I don't know what to do: can you help me, man? I hate her!"

"I never heard how she followed you back, this time, from Rome," Marchmoram replied, almost absently.

"I wish I could tell you, that I might lay my plans better another time. I left her there myself, under the charge of Father Iago, who ought to have been a match for her in cunning. But not a month after I left Rome, while sitting on the low garden wall at Cintra, smoking, a pair of flaming eyes shot out a burning glance upon me. I sprang to my feet, and uttered an imprecation; it saved me: the glance was not repeated, and the face disappeared. I walked on to the hotel, but a weight, as of lead, was upon me. How was I to

get rid of this fiend? I felt assured she was dogging me, then. It struck me that, being in that strange country, I might be able to frighten her. I turned, and, knowing she was behind, went by a circuitous route to the house of the chief of the police, whom I brought back with me near to the spot of her first ambush. Then, speaking distinctly enough for her quick ears to hear, and in French (which she understands), I told him there was a woman watching me, whom I should require to have arrested on a charge that I would make when she was in custody. I gave him a minute description of her, and directed him to look out for her, and discover her abode; then, lowering my voice, I told him I wished her conveyed to Lisbon, and offered him a large reward, giving him a sum on the spot. I knew she would believe that the police would seize her unless she fled; and so I got rid of her. I never met those glaring eyes again until last week: now she is here. How am I to get rid of her? her cleverness and tact are wonderful. A horrible feeling comes over me sometimes, that I shall never be able to escape her: her jealous infatuation amounts to insanity. No man could torment a woman, as a woman like this can torment a man."

"A thought strikes me," said Marchmoram. "Harold's valet, Gupini, is about as clever a fellow as I ever met, and will do anything for money: could you not get him to take her abroad, and pension him as long as he keeps her away from you?"

"Not a bad idea, Godfrey; but she would stiletto him." He was silent for a moment, then added, "Well, if I can arrange with Gupini satisfactorily, and he manages to keep her away, all will be well."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A HIGHLAND WEDDING.

Mark yonder pomp of costly fashion,
Round the wealthy titled bride;
But when compared with real passion,
Poor is all the princely pride.—BURNS.

"Beneath his darkened brow the smile
Of pleased revenge with hatred strove."

THERE had been anxiety at Glenbenrough about Normal Mac Alastair, and during the last fortnight letters of inquiry and reply had passed constantly to and from Ardvaishien.

Normal had been ill nigh unto death; for many weeks he lay as in a trance, and, though his mind had returned, the exhaustion kept him prostrate. He had been seized with fever, in a reed-thatched hut, on a desolate spot of swampy ground, amongst the wooded hills of the Spanish coast. The robust constitution that succumbed to no fatigue on Highland hills, and defied with impunity the Northern blast, was struck down in a night in these moist wooded valleys. A long day's overheated walk, and a sleep in the moonlight on the cool flowery edge of a poisonous marsh, brought on a violent fever, and he was scarcely conscious when they lifted him up, and bore him to the rugged shelter of his hut. They then wrapped him in his Highland plaid, and carried him down to the seaport, where he found a friend in the English consul, who received him into his house. He was well nursed, and as he slowly recovered, his father and friends learnt that it was mostly owing to the tender care of the consul's only daughter. When he had arrived there a short time before, in full health and strength, her admiration and curiosity had been excited; but the stalwart young Scotchman seemed wholly absorbed in his sporting pursuits. Now, however, he was thrown helpless at her feet, and she had suddenly become the sustainer of his strength: her presence was the sunshine of his life. She saw a smile on his lip as she spoke; his eye met hers, and his sunburnt cheek flushed as she sang to him, in a sweet low voice, well-remembered English ballads. But she knew not of his far-off Highland home at Arduashien, and that Normal only traced in her gentle and graceful tendence of him, a resemblance to the dark-eyed earnest Norah, who was to him as a sister. In Normal's letters—for he was soon able to write short bulletins to his father—he spoke constantly of his debt of gratitude to the consul's daughter, and in the last letter which Glenbenrough received from Arduashien, the old laird wrote thus:—

“So convinced are his mother and myself that the precious life of our Normal has been mainly saved to us through the devoted care of this dear young lady, that we have joined in a letter giving our free consent to his future marriage with her, should that be desirable to both. She will prove an admirable wife for our son. I don't know if I told you that the consul is a cadet of the elder branch of the Welch Penryn Tremyn family, and consequently Miss Penryn is related to the Tremyns of Troy, who married into the families of Couchman and

Thistlebank in the last century; and she is thus a cousin also of Penryn of Pree, the present M.P. for Brecon, and of other as ancient families."

What thought Esmé of this? Many uncomfortable and perplexing feelings tormented her. She hated this letter of old Arduashien, and then she hated herself. She did not mention to Florh the contents of this letter from Normal's father; neither did Ishbel, whom also it annoyed.

At Glenbenrough spring was advancing with its tenderest colours and most delicate perfumes: the snow had retreated to its everlasting bed in the hollows upon the highest hills, and lay there in defiance of the strengthening sunshine and soft spring breezes, at whose approach the glens and vales beneath gladdened in bright verdurous welcome, the grass springing up freshly above the wintry weather-beaten heather, and the waving tendrils of larch and birch hanging out their buds and tassels. The meadows clothed themselves in gorgeous gold, from the rich braes and banks of whin, glowing with colour and diffusing peach-like perfume for miles around, to the little paly primroses, carpeting every wood and garlanding the roots of the yet thin-leaved trees. The very rocks, bleached by the winter snow, shone brightly in silver gray in the early summer sun. It was a time of expectation, without as well as within. Esmé and Ishbel marked impatiently the opening garden flowers and orchard blossoms; they wished all Glenbenrough to be decked in bridal freshness, for Norah was soon expected home, and her marriage was there to take place. Their father had gone to England for her, and soon after her return Harold was to follow with other English friends. They would have triumphal arches of dark green pine and holly, gracefully festooned with deer's-grass, to welcome them. A marriage had not taken place within the old walls of Glenbenrough for nearly a century. The present laird, and his father and grandfather before him, were only sons, without sisters, and had been made bridegrooms at other homes; and the old people of the place had long looked forward to the day when one of the young daughters of the present Glenbenrough would have a braw wedding night. Alas! there was no son to go elsewhere for his wife, and the name of Mac Neil of Glenbenrough was nigh becoming extinct.

Norah came home with her father, and for a fortnight the three sisters were together almost inseparably; they climbed all the old, well-beloved hills, rowed and bathed in the bright

beautiful river, gathered deer's-grass and holly on the Roua Pass and the garden banks, and, mounted on their ponies, they rode to some of the very furthest glens, where Norah said good-bye in every cottage to her father's people: not one of the old time-worn women, or smiling hard-labouring young ones, scattered over scores of heathery miles, but received a parting gift. All the near and far distant "merchants" also blessed Miss Mac Neil's generosity, for it emptied their different small shops of long-piled heaps of woollen stuff, groceries, ribbons, and brought a large margin to that year's gains and profits. Florh came from Lochandhu, and took up her abode at Glenbenrough, her cottage being in the meantime shut up, as Ewen also was sent for: his mother rejoiced at the occupation now given him in many of the preparations for Norah's coming wedding. It was his part to go to Arduashien and Strathshielie for various assistance required; to superintend the arrangement of the barns into dormitories for the distant tenants, who were all sure to come; and to see as to the correct pitching of the tents on the lawn. Ewen had been a trial to Florh all winter: he refused to arouse himself, after his brother's death, to any useful occupation; but sat in daily increasing gloomy despondency by the fireside, engaged in some indolent sedentary way—polishing Normal's fire-arms, or dressing trout and salmon flies: even when the time for tillage of their small arable croft came on, he lent to Florh but a grudging helping hand in her labours on it. Now, however, he had to exert himself in the general pleasant excitement at Glenbenrough; and Florh secretly looked forward to a further distraction, which she hoped would, like some sudden severe operation, cure his disease by removing at once, and for ever, the cause of it.

As long as Jeanie Cameron lived, Ewen's morbid interest in his blighted hopes and love would continue to exist, along with other sore and galling feelings; but the poor girl seemed likely soon to be removed from earth. She had returned to her father's home not many weeks ago, after an absence during the winter and spring; and people at the kirk told Florh she was dying: she was thin, wasted, and had "a wrastlin' cough," and the "streekit look" was upon her whitened lips. A stern sense of expediency hardened Florh's character, as *surely as it does that of all whom it may influence: she thought it would be best if Jeanie died. Ewen would fret sore, and then recover: there would be no more fuel for hope*

or for hatred: in her grave all the past would be buried. Believing this, she listened almost with pleasure, when, a week before Norah's marriage-day, her son called her out to speak to him in the birch wood at the back of Glenbenrough. "Oh! mother," and Florh saw the unusual tear quiver in his cold gray eye, "I hae na mentioned her name to ye this year; but I must do it now, for likely one o' the last o' times. I was hot wi' the weight o' the tent ropes I was carrying the day from Dreumah, and I stepped down to take a drink from the spring 'mang the ferns near her father's house, when I came sudden on her sitting there. I minded the last day I saw her there before, at Martinmas, when I gave her such hard words, and cast up yon English fine gentleman. She could na hae answered me to-day as then, had she wished it, mother: her face was as wan as one o' the lilies on Lochandhu, and her eyes were as deadly bright as a dying hawk's; her voice came low and weak, and fitful as the scarce-stirring wind. Oh, mother, I was ahint her, and heard my own name: she said it sighing like to break her heart. 'Oh, Ewen! the evil one sent a glamour o'er me. Oh, my ain auld faithfu' laddie! would ye but forgie me ere I dee?' I don't know how I turned my steps backward; but I did. She didna see me, an' I was feared, had I come forward, I would greet, so I moved on, an' left her there in her loneliness."

"Aye, aye, my son," Florh replied, in a compassionate tone; "puir lassie, puir lassie! When she is deid, ye maun bear it as the wark o' Providence, an' seek no to meddle in His decrees. It was aye intended ye and she should never make out your contract, otherwise she wad na be this way noo. Ye'll see she'll tell yoursel' to forgie her, and let her die in peace, and mak ye promise to live in peace for her sake: I know she will; and she'll leave this desire as a legacie for your soul's good. Whenever Miss Norah's wedding is over I'll gae to Jeanie Cameron; an' then ye'll come later, maybe, an' see her too, an' tak her last words from hersel'."

"That'll depend on what she will hae to tell me," Ewen gloomily replied, wiping his brow with his bonnet. "I'll let her die in peace, my puir lassie; but if I hear I hae more to forgie than hersel'—if she'll ask me to forgie any one that has wronged her and me—mother, I'll no! I'll never, never do it! I'll no tell her, but I tell it you: if I find I hae cause for it, the day o' her death will set me on my revenge."

"Ye hae nae cause for it, Ewen," Florh replied sternly, a curious twinkling look lighting up her mouth and eyes. "Ye'll find Jeanie will have no one to blame but hersel'. I'll take care that to you, at any rate, she won't," she mentally added.

The night before the wedding, Harold and Norah stood together on the old hall door-steps. The July moon rested large, soft, and silvery above the Roua Pass, lighting up the silent flowery arches and leafy canopies of myrtle-green which spanned the way from the house to the bridge, and showing the outlines of the piles of wood for bonfires, ready to burst to-morrow into myriads of flame on every rocky height; and, as their eyes wandered over the scene, always returning to each other, the peaceful moonlight mingled with the sunshine of their hopes, and shed exquisite happiness through their hearts. It was time for Harold to go: his horse had long been waiting to carry him from his bride's sight (according to Scottish etiquette) until they met next day to part no more. He was to sleep at Dreumah, where most of his English friends were expected that day. Norah and her sisters walked slowly with him towards the silvery quivering river; his horse stood impatient on the other side. Ishbel called out as he looked back, ere the bridge was gained,

"Ah well, Basil, though Norah won't see the bonfires here to-morrow, she is going to see a much grander one. If I could go post-haste to Mount Vesuvius, as she will, I would give up the sight here too."

Harold turned back to retort, glad of the excuse thus given him, and the opportunity of a few more parting words with Norah.

"I really believe I forgot to tell you, dearest, that my old valet, Gupini, is to return to me; but in capacity of courier; and invaluable, indeed, he will be in that capacity. I got a letter from him, dated from Naples, about a fortnight ago, saying he had heard of my intended marriage, and offering to return; so, knowing of what service he would be abroad, I accepted his offer. He was to arrive at Dreumah to-night, I think: and if you remember to ask him to-morrow, Ishbel, he will tell you whether Vesuvius is worth looking at just now."

Another good-night, and Harold rode lingeringly away.

So large an assemblage of Highland friends had been invited, that Glenbenrough knew the drawing-room would not contain them all; it was therefore arranged that the marriage should take place in the open air, upon the heather-covered

lawn, over which an awning was stretched, extending along the river bank : there two hundred guests were to drink the bridal toast with Highland honours. For it was to be a Highland wedding, with festivities before, during the ceremony, and after it. Lady Lauriston, and Lady Mac Neil and her daughters, had been there for a week, exercising their taste and fancy in all the arrangements, and Harold and Norah had themselves gathered many branches from the blossoming trees, and loaded baskets with fruit and flowers for the joyful occasion. The marriage ceremony was to take place at four o'clock in the afternoon, as by that hour the heat of the summer sun would have abated.

Soon after two, the ponderous old family carriages of distant guests began to arrive. First came Normal's father and mother, Mr. and Mrs. Mac Alastair of Arduashien, whose appearance at a festivity was as rare as such an event as the present had hitherto been at Glenbenrough : but the happiness of Normal's recovery had been an additional stimulus towards this exertion. (Arduashien told Glenbenrough he had as yet received no reply to his important letter). Sir Roderick and Lady Glenmardie came next, with a piper playing on the roof of the carriage ; then the Couchferns, young Couchfern with his brilliant, handsome face and Highland dress doing honour to the day ; a string of dog-carts followed, filled with kilted men, all sons of the lairds who were following more staidly with their wives ; and in the wake of the dog-carts filled with her fancied admirers, Mrs. Grant of Seatoune, reclined in stiff-laced agony in her carriage, with galling tight white satin shoes, and a heap of finery on the top of her wig. The people from the different districts flocked in bands, headed each by the local piper : from the Dual Ghu, from Phee, and from every distant part of the property, they came ; and their approach was indeed a striking sight. The procession came by the Roua Pass, and was augmented by the people of Lochandhu, the strains of the bagpipe announcing them while still far off. First marched the piper, with quick steps, with his flying ribbons and inflated cheeks ; along the perilous edge of the narrow pass, keeping time with his inspiring strains, he led the single endless file, which came on with heads erect, pressing close upon each other ; not a man had thought of the precipice, and every foot kept time to the stirring tones of the beloved music.

Suddenly a general excitement spread through the numerous

company on the lawn, and burst forth in a deafening cheer, echoed from height to height, as the dust of the rapidly approaching carriage, and the combined bands of pipers treading past to the welcome, announced that the bridegroom and his friends were in sight. Esmé, as she stood amidst the fair bridesmaid group on the hall door-step, grasped the cold iron of the balustrade for support, as she thought she saw March-moram's figure next to Harold's. Ishbel saw the anxious suspense, the earnest expectant gaze, and whispered in sisterly love.

"Esmé, he is not there; be composed: here is Mr. Auber coming."

And at the same moment the latter, separating from the augmenting crowd around Harold, advanced to where his practised eye had marked, almost from the bridge, the cluster of lovely girls. As Auber's soft tones of greeting fell upon Esmé's ear, and her eyes met his shadowy gaze, the hot blood mounted almost to her temples; and her emotion betrayed itself in the alternate bright colour and deadly paleness of her cheek. Auber had seen and noted every phase of her confusion, save its cause, which he interpreted, confidently, but mistakenly. The knowledge of her love for him, the fresh touch of her cool little hand, the unchanged, or rather improved, aspect of her beauty, the quickly-formed vista of a delightful freshening summer and autumn, all touched with revivifying power the *blasé* man; and a smile almost natural lit up his dark face.

And now, leaning with drooping head upon her father's shoulder, the bride makes her exit for ever from her maiden home. Where on earth could there be a prettier scene than that? Nature lent her grandest background to the animated picture, and the glorious July sun sent its deep glow to soften and enhance the beauties of the scene. Midst silence unbroken, save by the rushing of the unheeding river, and beneath the golden sunshine, the Highland girl and her English bridegroom stood, whilst the clergyman, in the simplicity of the Presbyterian form, proceeded to make them one. His uncouth figure, in its plain canonicals, and his loud sonorous accents, heightened, by contrast, the graceful elegance of Norah's slight figure, richly veiled in its bridal lace, as she bent low to listen to his address; while Harold, with his *finely-chiselled* face and upright manly dignity, looked a fit support for so fair a creature. Norah's wreath and bouquet were of rare but perishable beauty: that very morning had

the natural orange-flower and myrtle arrived from Harold's Hall, under care of a special messenger; and the sprig of white heather which Harold bore, had been gathered by Norah's self that very morning on the Roua Pass. To the English people present the marriage ceremony was imposing from its primitive simplicity. They saw the clergyman address the bride with fatherly earnestness, setting before her the duties of the holy state; and then turn to the bold bridegroom, and exhort him to love and protect his wife. With a firm grasp he next joined their hands, and announced them to be now, with his blessing and their own consent, a married pair. Then, releasing their hands, he retreated a step, and with closed eyes poured forth a prayer in low pleading tones; his eloquence and feeling impressing the reverent listeners, as he addressed every state and condition there. At last he paused and gave his blessing to the bridal pair, and then, his sacred functions fulfilled, he shook hands with blithe good-will. The ceremony over, the festivities commenced. A brilliant collation had been laid out under the long green-leaved awning, and the company comprised all the Highland gentry for many miles round; except the Miss Rankins, who were vainly attempting to gain eligible establishments for themselves in the high circles of London. Not a guest was there who did not heartily sympathise in the events of the day, and who turned not in pleasure from Norah's lovely countenance to the mellow autumnal face of her father, telling for itself the history of his long, untarnished life. His generous friendship, his many acts of kindness, had won for the honourable, open-hearted laird of Glenbenrough the esteem of his equals and the love of the poor. Many were the enthusiastic toasts, given in sparkling language, and drunk in frothing champagne, to the continued prosperity of his roof-tree; many the elegant compliments paid to the charms of his remaining daughters; and, towards the close of the entertainment, not a few hints were thrown out in broad accented Scotch, or more fortunately unintelligible Gaelic—from the lower end of the tables, where substantial farmers sat—of the hopes of some future grandson taking the name and bearing it on in all the time-honoured associations of Mac Neil! In the grand final toast of "the health of Mr. and Mrs. Harold," all the glasses were dashed to the ground in true Celtic fashion. Many of the country people obstinately declined giving the bridegroom his prefix; as, if a laird, why not "Harold"?

Esmé sat next to Lord Darnton, he as "best man" having led her to the feast; this added to her enjoyment, for in some degree he reminded her of Marchmoram, for whom she had at first mistaken him; and she talked to him in her own style, as she had done in her first unfettered intercourse with Marchmoram: and Lord Darnton met her almost as he had done. The style of conversation of these men of the world suited Esmé; she never had enjoyed the delight of converse with well-read, travelled, and conversible men of her own country. The intellectual qualities of Scotchmen seem to be held too much in reserve: an indescribable matter-of-factness pervades them, and insensibly restrains the mind from any flight of fancy.

Miss Christy had been rather in a subdued state all day: a due sense of propriety kept her in the background; but during lunch, being happily placed betwixt Dr. and Mrs. Macconochie, and thus beyond the ken of the surrounding "fine gentry," her spirits gradually recovered. Lord Darnton quietly called Esmé's attention to Miss Christy, who mysteriously laid across her knees one pocket-handkerchief on the top of another, which she had already spread to preserve her dress: for she despised the use of a napkin. The purpose of this was soon apparent, when, by means of nods and becks, she had induced a servant to approach with a plate of cake; for, picking out a huge slice, she carefully wrapped it in the upper handkerchief and, producing a pin from her mouth, pinned it up. Catching Esmé's and Lord Darnton's watchful eyes at the moment, she nodded confidentially, and whispered through her hand, as she thrust the prize into her pocket,

"Dreaming breid, my laird: I'll hae a bit ready for yoursel' afore night, an' ye'll just sleep upon it for good luck, ye see."

The first tears shed that day fell when Norah parted with her sisters in her own old room; and as she threw herself into her father's arms, tears stole down his manly cheeks. His warm heart bled as this first link was severed; for never had father's love more entwined itself amidst the youthful years of home-taught motherless daughters. The young couple were gone; the guests had gathered in hundreds on the lawn and round the carriage, and—despite the expostulations of Harold and Glenbenrough—claimed, in loud joyful lawlessness, the long-accustomed honour of drawing the carriage past the "running stream." The horses were already out, and led

down to the flowery arch of the bridge ; and the next moment, those strong men whirled the carriage along at full speed : the gentlemen all went with it, and Glenbenrough, his hand firmly holding the edge of the door nearest which Norah sat, ran with the vigour of a younger man, ready to shout the warning word at a moment's notice. Norah had covered her eyes with her thick Brussels lace veil ; but ere the impatient horses, harnessed by fifty hands, had started, and while the shouts of the people and the strains of the bagpipes were still echoing upon her ear, she leant out of the carriage, and again and again embraced her father. He then went round to grasp Harold's hand, and she gazed back upon the house, which stood out gray and clear against the bright sky ; and as the rich July evening glow fell upon all the gay groups assembled upon the river banks, waving handkerchiefs and bonnets, she saw Esmé and Ishbel standing on the Roua Pass, whence they could best catch a last glimpse of the carriage. That evening was long remembered by all present. Those guests who came from a distance had accommodation in the houses of Glenbenrough, Phee, the Manse, and at the Factor's, while a glorious summer moon tempted others to delay their drive home until early morning. Dancing was kept up in the sultry open air and within the house, while supper and refreshments were served all night in the dining-room and in the outer awning : in short, it was what is called a "real Highland wedding ;" and every one enjoyed it, from the ladies on the lawn to the lassies dancing in the barn. The bonfires on the hills were a beautiful sight, spreading crimson flashes all over the pale blue evening sky ; and at about twelve o'clock, one on the summit of the Roua Pass burst forth into a blaze brighter than all.

CHAPTER XXIV.

LOVE TORMENTS.

O ! list yon thrush, my Mary,
That warbles on the pine ;
His strain sae light and airy,
Accords in joy wi' thine,
Singing aye welcome hame.—Hogg.

ON the night of Norah's wedding Esmé and Auber stood together on the Roua Pass, screened from the glare of the blazing bonfire by a projecting mass of rock, and silent

gazing on the scenery around, which was lighted up by the bright midsummer moon, and flecked by the lurid hues of the fire-light from distant peaks. To Auber there appeared more charms about Esmé this evening than ever before : she was paler than when he had last parted from her, and he thought she had even grown taller. Excitement, or it might be the few months more advance towards womanhood which generally darkens thoughtful eyes, had made hers of still deeper, softer blue ; and the flexile expression of her lips was rather the sweet, saddened smile, than the arch playful one of other days. He saw that she had had her thoughts deeply stirred this winter ; and he had been right when he told her she would never be able to forget him : was not the shadow of a loved remembrance upon that clear and thoughtful brow ? Esmé was nervous ; she dreaded the first change of Auber's voice in any approach to tenderness : if he spoke of love, how should she reply ? But she was safe that night : his words that night were only of the softest ambiguity. After a pause Esmé asked quickly, and in a low tone, a question that had been sometime trembling on her lips. "Is Mr. Marchmoram coming North, Mr. Auber ?" He turned round with a look of half-surprised scrutiny ; her eyes fell beneath his, and she coloured deeply as he replied,

"He may be here to-morrow, or he may not come at all : and his stay at Dreumah would, at any rate, be uncertain. Godfrey is too busy a man now, and has too many schemes afloat for his plans to be counted on. Did it strike you that Darnton resembled Marchmoram ?"

Esmé turned as pale as her dress. Well might this man boast of his power.

He studied her downcast face as she replied, as firmly as she could,

"Yes, I think so."

He drew out a packet of letters, and slowly selected one.

"This is Godfrey's last : will you read it ? It is short, and the moon is bright."

Esmé's hand shook as she took it, so that she could scarcely hold it ; and she dropped the envelope, which a light breeze at the moment blew over the edge of the Pass and into the river. Auber's gaze was fixed upon her, and suddenly he took her hand in his.

"Why this agitation ? Is Godfrey Marchmoram's name so dear ? Esmé, Esmé, beware !"

He drew her towards him; but suddenly let fall her resisting hand, as the voices of Glenbenrough and Lady Mac Neil, who had ascended unobserved, sounded close beside them. Auber was never at fault; he gave Esmé one glance of appealing silence, and then picking up Marchmoram's unread letter from the ground, advanced with careless *sang froid* towards her father and Lady Mac Neil. Esmé sunk behind a drooping birch, out of sight, and then moved on over the heather towards the red glare of the bonfire; when very near it, she sat down upon a rock. Two men were standing beside the fire, but with their backs to her; they were conversing, and one of them suddenly giving a loud laugh accompanied by a grotesque foreign gesture, she recognized in him the Italian Gupini: the other was Ewen Mackenzie. They had been speaking low, but Gupini now raised his voice, and she heard him distinctly, though not so Ewen's answers.

"Corpo di bacco! Who die for a woman? Me left Napoli to save my life from one! si, si; a woman that Signor Auber me pay if me killed her: she love him too much—é troppo! You only amuse yourself—me only amuse—they amuse; but who die?"

Esmé thought that Ewen's reply was a deep-muttered curse.

"Ah! not your fault if she die: you forget her! You should see me manage Signora Lucia, il Signor Auber's cara amica. She tear her hair and say she loved him so, and he dare not forsake her. I tell her to forget him, and make merry while life last. So I say to you—and you in Scozia! you are cold—you can forget, and a woman in Scozia can forget: I pity you not. But Lucia, la Gitana, she is as the Italian: her love is warm, her hatred is hot. Ah! per Dio, per Dio!" he exclaimed, with excited gesticulation; "che maraviglio! il mondo ammirabile! Lucia, la *Bella* bellissima!"

Ewen then spoke long and vehemently, but was frequently interrupted by Gupini, sometimes as if expostulating, at others laughingly mocking. At last Ewen raised his voice with threatening gesture, and Esmé again heard the words.

"Ye're going the night, an' I'm never to see ye mair; but ye gae not till I hear the name which you have aye told me ye could gie. I have na rested waiting for it since months: I hae my suspicions almost sure, but I want just your word. When I know it I am content; but look, if ye gie it not ye'll meet me yet! An' if ye 'll no satisfy me now," Ewen bent down, placed

his hand upon his skein dhu, and tapped it significantly, "I'll take this wi' me, man, and trip after ye!"

Gupini retorted quickly, with much gesticulation; but Esmé only heard Ewen's reply, as he threw a log of wood passionately into the fire.

"Na, na, coward! I'll bring ye into no worse danger if ye'll tell the name. I'll do no harm to you or him, or any other. I'll keep quiet, never ye fear."

Gupini said a few words, and retreated, as if to descend the hill; he then called out,

"Well, guardatevi! E' Signior—e' Signior—Marchmoram! Addio!" then turning, he bounded down in the direction of the square. Ewen stepped forward for a moment, seemingly breathless with rage; and as the fierce blaze of the new-kindled wood fell full upon his face, it would have done for that of the demon of fire: his fiendish expression of malignity subsided into a withering laugh, and his lips distorted into a savage grin.

"So I was right! Weel, weel, he has made good use o' Ewen Mackenzie! Insulted wi' his tongue, struck wi' his hand, and ruined my ain bit lassie! Weel, weel, we'll see."

He kicked the glowing embers right and left in his fury, and turned away; passing close to Esmé without seeing her. He then made for the Pass, which he slowly descended on the side leading down to Lochandhu.

It was the third day after Norah's marriage, and quiet had come again on the house of Glenbenrough; the last guest had departed, and the faded flowers had all been swept away. Early on the morning succeeding the marriage, Florh awoke Esmé with comfortable news:

"I hae been, an' come, frae Lochandhu," she said, "an' all is right. Hae no fear o' the lad: I found him packing a' his claithees when I went in, down to the very remindings o' Huistan puir fellow."

"An' for what are you doing this?" said I.

"I'm going off to Arduashien," said he: "an' good-bye, mother; for I hae taken a sickening to this place. My mind's made up. I'll gae frae Arduashien to join my young master: he'll no refuse me now he's sick. An' my savings here, showing me his leather pouch, 'will take me o'er the sea to the foreign place he is in. Gie my fond love an' my forgiveness to Jeanie Cameron. If a' goes right, I may yet see her and ye once more afore I go.' With the knowledge o' what was in his heart, I could na do mair than mak a faint pretending o'

being against his going ; for my heart was rejoicing, Esmé ! An' so my poor lad went, an' my prayer following him. I'll gae to Arduashien the end o' the week, for he said himsel' he might na be gone till ten days ; as I wad rather say good-bye till him there, than see him back here at all. I'll gae see Jeanie Cameron ere I go, and bring him the last words o' her."

Florh remained at Glenbenrough ; and two days after Esmé said she would ride to Lochandhu, as she had not gathered a water-lily this summer : she would also call at Erickava, in hopes of finding a precious first letter from Norah, Florh gave her the key of her cottage, as within it she would find the forked branch so long dedicated to the capture of the lilies. Norah's letter lay at Erickava : it was very short, but very satisfactory ; they had reached Blair Athol, one of the lovely resting places on the Highland road : their days had been cloudless, and they were very happy. After seeing this missive despatched home, Esmé rode on to Lochandhu. It was one of those serene glowing days, like many and many on which she had before sat beside that bright little loch : the air was oppressive, as much from the heat as from the warm perfumes, which the sun brings out as it does colour ; and yet the honied heather, and the spicy aromatic flavour of bog-myrtle, thyme, and birch, are not o'erpowering in their sweetness, like the more luscious scents of lowland flowers. The lilies lay in a glittering heap, which she covered from the heat of the sun with their large green, dripping leaves. How luxurious to lay down her head beside them, and listen, in the dreamy quiet, to the splash of the trout leaping up at the little disporting midges, and to hear the humming of the flashing dragon-flies darting through the sunbeams on the gold-coloured water. Where were her thoughts to find Marchmoram ? She drew vivid pictures, such as her imagination could always paint ; she fancied the interior of the House of Commons, and sought o'er its crowded benches for the one commanding face ; she pictured him, in his own room, reading the papers of the morning, and saw the impatient glance of his eye over their contents. She thought of him as driving onwards o'er the bleak Highland road, and in idea she urged the lagging horses to come faster on. She thought of him as writing to his friend that day, telling him that duty called him from London in some other direction, and that he would not visit Dreumah that year ; and then the tears came. Oh ! her heart was sick with longing to see him once again. Once again. That was

a strange feeling, mysterious in its undefined but all-pervading conviction that if they could but meet once again she should be satisfied. She went not beyond that; but a craving for it certainly rested in her mind: once satisfied, it would rest in deep quiet ever after. She raised her head and looked steadfastly athwart the hills towards Dreumah; slowly and slowly her gaze returned, lingering back o'er hill and glen, until it suddenly fell upon the stalwart figure of Marchmoran, within a hundred yards of her, advancing from a rugged rent in the rocks: with slow, firm step he came, bodily visible, himself—stepping strongly and easily over the sunken old tree-roots, and over the sharp rocks and dark heather-holes intervening betwixt her and him. Esmé had been praying for his return; but when she saw him now—as if a wraith had risen awfully to her feet—she arose, and with terror turned to fly. But his shadow was already on her, and his strong voice arrested and sustained her.

“Esmé!”

Then she stood; the colour faded from her cheek and left the whiteness, but not the rigidity, of marble. He reached her, his arms were around her, and one warm, passionate kiss brought back the glow.

“Esmé, you were not going to turn from me?”

That deep, low voice sounded deeper, graver than last year. He sat her down again upon the heather, and he knelt upon a rock beside her and laid his hand tenderly on her fair shining head. She looked up, the traces of tears still in her dark blue eyes, and said softly,—

“Oh, you have been very long in coming.”

“I have been busy, Esmé; I am so still: I have entered on a life of slavery, where mind is the taskmaster, and where the body must obey: and I have treated mine very relentlessly for many months past.”

She saw that: his face was lined and fagged, and there was a feverish tinge of colour on his brow and cheek; his eyes seemed to her to have darkened from their former brown more into gloomy black; the thin cut lips appeared to be still more sharply defined.

Esmé replied, her voice still nervously trembling, “I know you have been working hard, and I was almost thinking you would never return.”

He bit his lip quickly; sighed deeply, as if wearied, and then said in a low, measured tone,—

"Oh, Esmé, I have much to tell you ; but I want quiet rest with you for a time : I need to gain fresh life and strength with you, ere I speak on that which has brought me North. Latterly my soul has thirsted for this hour ; to be here again, to sit thus near you, to hear your loving, tender voice, to feel the gentle, heavenly influence which your very presence bears over me ; and, above all, in this very weakness of my love, to gain strength for the great crisis which approaches. Child, let us be together for a time as we were in other days."

She then began to tell him of Norah's marriage ; and as he sat there looking at her and listening, and heard her sunny laugh, marked the graphic colouring of each little sketch drawn for his amusement, and saw the naturalness of her ease with him, the careworn contraction of that busy, scheming brow seemed to relax, and the dawning smile of fresher days broke over the deeply-lined thoughtful face. They sat there for sunny hours beside the Highland loch ; and as Esmé, in the abstraction of her delight, allowed all her pent-up thoughts to flow freely forth, Marchmoram rested himself in this fresh excitement, and renewed the vigour of his life. They went down to Glenbenrough, where Marchmoram was welcomed as a returned and valued friend. Glenbenrough went half way up the Roua Pass to meet him, while Ishbel waited beneath to give her delighted greetings. What a warm, genial evening it was ! They strolled to all the ancient haunts ; they sat out until late, until the merle and the mavis ceased their serenade ; and when they went in the air was still so warm, so quiet, that every door and window was thrown open to admit the cool night air and the silvery light of the moon. Ishbel sat and rested her head against her father's shoulder, who smiled with proud content upon the two loved ones left him yet, while Esmé played her wild Gaelic airs, with Marchmoram standing near her.

Scarcely had Marchmoram said good-night, when Florh appeared, to ask Esmé for the key of her cottage ; and when, with some confusion, Esmé, remembering at the same moment her basket of water-lilies fading on the bank of the loch, owned to having forgot it, Florh replied shortly,—

"It does na matter : I'll find the door open for mysel', for I'm going home the night, methal."

"Why, Florh, you were to stay another week."

"Na ; I could not sleep sound the night here," she replied ; and Esmé reddened at the withering look which accompanied

her words. "I'll gae to Arduashien in ane or two days my son off, and I'll bring him word o' Jeanie Cameron, days are nearly run."

"Well, good-night, Florh," Esmé replied; "I will gae to see poor Jeanie Cameron."

Florh, as she went out, looked back and said, "I have a letter frae Normal: maybe ye'll see it by-and-by." when she passed Marchmoram a moment afterwards in entrance-hall, she courtesied deep and blandly to him.

Two days later, Glenbenrough and his daughters spent long day at Dreumah: it was almost as lovely and enjoyable as that first day when they had ridden there, now nearly year ago; save that Norah's dear face was missing, and that the ludicrous substitution of Miss Christy's gaunt form for the slight graceful one was almost painful in its absurdity.

Glenbenrough had smiled repeatedly the previous evening at the peal of laughter with which the girls heard that he had engaged her as the only eligible person, within reasonable distance; he considering that they would be the better for the company of a third lady. But he nearly repented when he saw her appearance next morning; Miss Christy being mounted on a bony Galloway accustomed occasionally to the plough at Phee, and taking as much exercise as her steed almost the whole way to Dreumah: sometimes running on foot while she whipped him up a hill, or anon standing perilously on his back while she gathered bunches of rowan berries, and darting off and on the saddle in a hair-brained manner at every obstacle on the path. They spent a long day by the loch, and drew from it upwards of fifty successful hauls, landing shoals of fish. Some of the gentlemen rowed Esmé and Ishbel in a pretty boat which Auber had brought North; while Miss Christy, who, during lunch, had sat in rather grim and doubtful silence, gave spontaneous play to her energies, encouraging the gillies by loud gesticulations. At the largest haul, when Glenbenrough and Lord Darnton rushed down to assist, Miss Christy burst forward too; and from that moment returned no more to the dry land, but remained with the crew, labouring with her own hands and awakening the echoes with her shrill fisherman-like cries. Auber's curiosity had been aroused, and his jealousy slightly excited by Esmé's emotion in regard to Marchmoram on the night of Norah's marriage. His self-love was safe as yet, for from circumstances regarding Marchmoram in his knowledge, he would not believe him a rival; but he

feared the possibility of Marchmoram's tender friendship for Esmé having led him to warn her, in a brotherly way, against trusting too implicitly to himself. Auber put on that manner of absent indifference which he could with such easy grace assume, and paid more attention to Ishbel; conversing on London gossip with Sir Edward Cressingham, whenever Esmé was near. After dinner in the lodge there was an adjournment to a grassy broom-perfumed knoll, where claret and fruit were partaken of in the delicious evening air with additional zest. Lord Darnton sang some songs; then Esmé and Ishbel joined in the beautifully simple "Baron's Heir," which Esmé once had sung to Marchmoram before; and he glanced so significantly, almost upbraidingly, at Lord Darnton, who was seated next to her, that the present look and past memory brought a vivid blush to her cheek. An earl, who would have realized the dream of that day, now sat admiringly beside her; but Fate ordained otherwise.

Marchmoram asked Esmé if she had ever been on the summit of Oraighrisht, the father mountain of Dreumah, whose fantastic peak now glittered and shone in the evening glow; the heat of the day was over, and he would take her up the rugged sides by the shortest route, which ran almost directly from the back of the lodge. This was one of the highest hills in that part of the country, and as they climbed up, the air became keener and rarer at every step, until their limbs, instead of wearying, seemed more elastic, and a feeling of buoyancy urged them on. They passed over ground of different soil and aspect; first, through the worn trunks of ancient trees, dead and leafless, where the ground was soft and soundless, being covered with thick ancient moss, into which they sunk to the knees at every step. They came up to the gully ravines of heather and natural grass, and the grouse in strong-fledged covies flew up ever and anon, whirring past with a gust of air. Then the grass began to disappear, and they got upon the slippery rock foundation, the water bubbling and sparkling over rocky ridges, and in deep silvery channels, and the light striking upon all shades of colour, from light blue to purple, slate, and dark-red granite. At last, hand in hand, they reached the top—a huge, broad, flat pedestal of white rock, which glittered like crystalline marble in the evening sun; further back rose the few gigantic rocks hurled grandly together that formed the cross on the peak, which from the first days of Christianity had given a name to the

hill. They now stood eighteen hundred feet above the sea. The view was sublime. Beneath appeared the lesser and the greater hills in ranges and groups, with sweeps of wood and water, stretching as far as eye could reach. They counted thirteen lochs, and traced the rivers Dual, Rouagh, Nightach and many others: the eye even reached the far-off chasm of the seven falls of Aultva, fringed with weeping birch. The colours of every object were brought out in glowing intensity in their natural hues by the summer sun, which now cast its parting rays o'er the scene. The air seemed to Esmé to become too rare for her lungs: it affected her sensibly. Twice she lay down and put her lips to the cold white stone and that brought back and steadied her breath.

As they gazed, Esmé could not but note the strange excitement of Marchmoram: his restless, darkening, flashing eye was wandering further than the scenery. At last he spoke, after long silence: his voice sounded harsh in its firm deep tone, and abrupt gestures accompanied his words.

"Esmé, do you know what I am like just now?" he smiled bitterly as she looked wonderingly up to him. "We two standing here together, so near, so far apart from others, as two different beings. You are worshipping nature, so am I; but, Esmé, I stood upon a height once before, and there was one who stood by me (I feel he listens now), and he showed me a world beneath: not like this, solitary, God-like, lonely but one of animated bustling crowds of uplifted faces, eager for patronage and throwing incense upwards to those great ones of the earth on high seats above: one stood by me pointing to the lofty throng and offered me rank, wealth, and many other dazzling things, and I accepted. Esmé, you would not have pictured this to me; you could not have said, 'I will give it you.'"

She was quite silent; he went rapidly on.

"Child, I have miserable things to lay before you: you are very young, but you are strong."

She listened to the avowal of his love and his desire that she should wait a favourable time. She could do that; she could wait to the end: she was strong as he could wish; but those ruthless words received no spoken answer from her. He scarce had ceased when the mountain echoes seemed to take up the words and carry them vauntingly onwards. A low, distant peal of summer thunder rolled overhead, and was *muttering* away; it was followed by two crashes in a

succession. The dread of thunder and lightning was with Esmé a constitutional terror : the electric state of the atmosphere affected her, she caught Marchmoram's hand and bent down upon the rock beside him, while peal followed peal, each being caught up and carried onwards in long, low, distant moans to the far-off hills.

"Oh ! I can't stay here : take me down !" she cried.

They went on ; the thunder breaking louder over their heads, the lightning fitfully illumining the scene. She clung to him, and again—as on that day nigh a year ago, on the wilds of Corrieandhu—his strong arm supported her. As they descended, the thunder died away and the lightning flashed fainter. He stopped then, and she smiled at her fears ; he pushed back the hair tenderly from her brow, and they went lingering down. When near the lodge, he stooped and gave her one firm kiss upon her brow. When they reached the knoll they found tea and coffee had taken the place of wine and fruit ; and also that the ponies stood saddled at the door.

As his daughters prepared to mount, Glenbenrough told Marchmoram that he expected Sir Henry and Lady Lauriston to arrive in a week from Strathshielie, where they had gone for a few days after Norah's marriage, and that then he hoped to spend some more pleasant days in the society of the gentlemen of Dreumah, who would be expected to join many projected open-air parties. In the discussion of these the cavalcade moved on, attended part of the way by the gentlemen ; Marchmoram, with folded arms, and in seeming attention, conversing with Glenbenrough, while Lord Darnton walked behind, in fits of laughter at Miss Christy. Auber was at Esmé's side, and modulated his voice so that it should reach but her ; he said but a few words ere they parted.

"Did you enjoy your walk, Esmé ?"

"Yes, Mr. Auber : the view was so grand and beautiful, I never can forget it ; only the thunder startled me at the end."

"Ah ! it thundered ?" he said, with a mock air of surprise : "so the elements came out to express their astonishment at Marchmoram's news ?"

"I don't understand you," Esmé replied.

"Why, it made a sensation in London," he said, looking with the same amused smile.

"I don't know what you refer to."

"Ah ! well ; really not ? Did Marchmoram seek so long a *tête-à-tête* without giving you his confidence ?"

"What do you mean?" she reiterated with *naïveté*, "a—tell me."

"No, I may not do that, Esmé, if he really withheld Auber replied: "it would be treachery to do so; and I should do as he would be done by, you know. But at same time," here he dropped his voice to a whisper glanced with deepest meaning—a tender, interesting, searching glance, "my conscience bids me warn you that, if you feel interest in Godfrey Marchmoram, it must be but abstract other is safe for you, Esmé. Trust in me this time."

She looked at him; and as they rode on the next morning Glenbenrough having called out farewell, she noticed the same soft, shadowy smile that she remembered first observed under the August moonlight there, nearly a year ago.

The gentlemen all stood still together until the rider out of sight, then strolled back to the lodge, to end the evening with cards and conversation. Marchmoram did not go in no one asked him why; he went down to the river the brawling at the back of the house, and walked along it was in nearly as excitable a mood as on that night at T. bank, but more concentrated: less turbulent and demonstrative but darker, moodier, and more determined. He walked by the heathery banks of the river, with the quiet, melting moon looking down upon him, and the rushing, frothing with the same cold, calm light which had fallen for ages ages on the restless midnight dreams and busy waking of mortals. The strong-winged wild birds, mated in tired beneath the blooming purple heather, were happier in generation than he.



CHAPTER XXV.

THE CRISIS.

I'm wearin awa, like snaw when it's thaw,
I'm wearin awa to the land o' the leal.—BURNS.

"The winds were laid, the air was still,
The stars they shot athort the sky;
The fox was howling on the hill,
And the distant echoing glens reply."

It was about eight o'clock the next evening when a message was delivered to Esmé from Florio. It was brought by a hard-boy who could not speak English, but he told

Gaelic that Jeanie Cameron was dying and restless to see her, and Florh hoped Esmé would come for an hour. He then put into her hand a small paper parcel, and the moment after was off again, like an escaped hawk, to his post on the hill. Esmé's pony was made ready, and she started at once; Glenbenrough and Ishbel walked up the Roua Pass with her. The evening was bright and lovely; but Esmé's errand was a solemn one, and inward feeling shadowed it, much as on that genial evening when Marchmoram returned to Glenbenrough. She had had some bitter moments in the quiet of her own room the previous night. Auber's light words had struck balefully at first, and poignant doubt stabbed her more than once: what had he meant? Did a rival exist in Marchmoram's heart? Was there reason to doubt his truth? No; away with all suspicion. With the natural trustingness of her character, Esmé refused to credit Auber's cruel words. Still this was a melancholy ride to Jeanie's cottage; and some tears fell (she scarce knew why) over the contents of the parcel that Florh had sent by the little herd-boy. It was a letter from Normal Mac Alastair to his foster-mother, dated some weeks back; and she read it slowly several times over as she rode along. Here, at any rate, she saw herself beyond the power of rival: it was the first time, in all their long childhood together, that Normal's heart lay open to her.

"Write to me of Esmé," he wrote, "she occupies my heart night and day; never, never is she absent: during all my fever, I believe it was the happy delirium of her presence which supported me in life; for I imagined her ever with me: that one idea possessed my wandering senses. It is infatuation; but it is part of my life—of my disease I should rather say. . . . Write me nothing but the truth about Esmé—I can bear it all. Have the Englishmen come North? Is she engaged to Mr. M.? This must soon be known: let me know it too, for it concerns me most. Florh, her happiness makes mine; so scruple not to say what you know. I am no coward! My love is not selfish; it goes utterly to her: and if she is happy in her love for another, then my parting wish will only be that he may ever deserve it."

This sudden revelation of the depth and devotedness of Normal's affection for her would at another time, and under other circumstances, have revived and strengthened the feelings of regard that Esmé had long entertained for him, but which she was not conscious were any other than those of *familiar friendship*; but now she felt perplexed and bewildered:

and what would have filled her with delight, had no lingering love for Marchmoran still absorbed her, now only to distress her, by causing mingled sensations of doubt, and concern. She dared not allow herself to think much of Normal; yet her thoughts would, unbidden, reach him, prompted by the spontaneous flow of kindly feeling that had lain hid in the depths of her nature; and she began to reproach herself for unkindness in having caused him to feel by her open preference for the society of the English. Might she not have sacrificed a strong and abiding love to a transient flame of passion? Yet could she doubt Marchmoran's fervour, or his sincerity? No, she would not wrong him. But still an indefinable, unrecognized sense of insecurity would torment her, in spite of herself; and her heart would yearn towards the absent Normal, and the presence of the fair girl who nursed him would create a strange feeling of uneasiness. Such a conflict of emotions had been round the breast of Esmé by the perusal of this letter of Normal, that it was a relief to her to find her sympathies diverted into a new channel by arriving at Jeanie Cameron's cottage.

When Esmé entered the small peat-smoked room, she first saw only her foster-mother, who was bending over the fire, heating some goat's milk and oatmeal; but a short hush, cough issuing from the darkened recess in the wall which contained the bed, made her turn there: the gleaming eyes of the poor girl lying there pierced through the gloom, and reached Esmé where she stood. She approached the bed, and, taking the wasted hand lying listlessly on the coverlet, gazed with tearful eyes on the dying girl. She scarcely believed that the hollow, colourless face, the thin lips, sharp features, and attenuated form before her was really what had been the ruddy, sunburnt, and well-limbed Jeanie of other days. The very expression of the face was totally changed: formerly a blithe, good-humoured smile alone marked it; now a saddened, grieving look, lit up but dimly with preternatural lustre, gave it an unearthly aspect. It was not Jeanie Cameron lying there, it was the shade of the Highland girl, whose immortal spirit struggled to escape from the frail tenement of clay. She would not have been thus in dying, nor would she have died thus, had she been Ewen's contented and respected wife. As Esmé sat down later, and felt the pressure of Jeanie's thin wan hand, she saw the hectic flush of shame rise to her brow, and listened

repenting, almost eloquent, words of the stricken, dying girl. Jeanie was very weak; but when she saw Esmé, she tried to raise herself, and faintly smiled a welcome; and when Esmé, having placed the pillows more upright and supportingly, seated herself on a wooden stool beside the low bed, she whispered in a broken voice,

"Oh! you dinna ken, Miss Esmé, the fancy I have aye had to you since the days when you were a wee bairn, (mysel' not very much bigger), and my eyes, in the kirk, used to wander off the book just to look at your glancing curls forenent me. I took a longing to see you, and speak to you, before I died; for someway my heart always went drawing after you."

"Yes, Jeanie," Esmé answered very quietly, in a broken voice; "I will come every day to see you until you are better. I did not know you were so ill: I have taken an interest in you, too, for a long time, and will do so still. We will bring the doctor to-morrow, and you will get on nicely then."

"No, no, no doctor, please dearie Miss Esmé!" Jeanie cried, with faint anxiety, and with a quick appealing look towards Florh, who had not spoken since Esmé's entrance, but still occupied herself at the fire. "The sight o' him would only hurry me to my grave. I hae no more use o' doctors; one o' them told me yon himself," she whispered: "but do ye come an' read the words o' life to me, which will help me to gain it after I am deid."

Esmé took her little Bible out of her pocket.

"I will read to you for a little, Jeanie, and then, if you like, I will sing a hymn to try and make you sleep."

"I'll no sleep till I hae my speech with you done, Miss Esmé: but read, aye do read; choose something for a weary, weary sinner. Oh! come," she called to Florh, "and put your prayers up with mine, for I need them."

Florh drew near them, and sat on the edge of the bed; while Esmé read, in a low, soft voice, and with deep earnestness, her favourite psalm, the fifty-first: she was interrupted as she proceeded, by convulsive sobs from Jeanie.

"I doubt if she has strength for more, the now," Florh said as Esmé ceased; "if we could settle her to sleep, it would be weel."

Florh then arranged the dark home-spun bedclothes tidily, while Esmé, taking a pitcher, went out to a spring before the door, and, having filled it, poured cold water and vinegar into a basin. She bathed the hot feverish hands and brow with her *own handkerchief*, which she afterwards bound round Jeanie's

head; then putting some strawberries between the part lips, moved gently away. She opened the low-roofed door and window for the scarce-stirring breeze to enter, while and Florh sat down outside the door. Jeanie fell into a dreaming sleep in the stillness of the twilight; the old man moans and croons of old Ian Mohr, who sat crouched on a stool of wood by the fire within, making an inexpressibly mournful lullaby. She was his darling grandchild; and the old man's failing strength all winter seemed to have gradually given way with her increasing weakness. They could hear him sigh every now and then,

"We'll no be parted, we'll no be parted! grandfather's dear darling lassie; we'll gae tottering out in death together."

"This is very good of you, Florh, and God will bless you for it," Esmé said, as she and Florh sat whispering together in moonlight, and she placed her hand affectionately on her father's mother's knee.

"Whisht, ma guil!" Florh replied, a strange and not pleasant smile breaking over her face, "Jeanie should hae been my good daughter, an' I would hae had the nursing o' her till Puir lassie, puir lassie! I wad like my ain mind made easy she die: I wish to hear the truth from her. I hope she'll sleep now; for I think it's to you she'll tell it: when she wakes, if her strength is better, I feel sure she'll tell me; I am longing to be off to Arduashien to see my Ewen ere he goes. And noo, Esmé," she added quickly, "will you write me yon letter? it must be burnt the night."

Esmé put Normal's letter into Florh's hand, who thrust it into her bosom. There was a mutual silence. At last Esmé said, as if anxious to revert to Jeanie,

"If she is so near death, you won't leave her, I hope: do not leave her at the last, when she seems so thankful and grateful to you."

"We must do things by calculation in this world, Esmé," Florh replied, with gloomy determination: "this lassie is for long on the earth, and me being with her would not deter her departure. My son is my only comfort now, and he is going awa' too; and I canna spare more time from him an' his companie for the sake o' one who will soon be gone for ever. It is for his sake I spend my time now; for I feel confident he'll never be right settled till he know, one way or another, the whole truth about her."

A slight stir and sigh showed that Jeanie was again awake.

Florh put her finger to her lip and motioned Esmé urgently to go in. It was darker within the cottage than without, and almost cooler, as the rough uncemented stones, which form the rude building of a Highland hovel, let the air and damp through. Jeanie made a gesture to Esmé to shut the door; she pushed it close, leaving Florh without, and seated herself again beside the bed. The dying girl's voice was fainter than before, as she said,

"Oh! I wish my father would come: if I can tell ye, dearie Miss Esmé, o' my sinful self, and then die in father's arms, I think I'll die content; but none but yourself must hear it."

Esmé rose and audibly asked Florh to go to a hillock in front, where she could see distinctly, and to come and tell Jeanie if Donald Cameron came in sight; for she thought he might yet arrive: he had been called to a distant sheep farm that morning. Florh went.

"Dear grandfather, wrap your plaid round your head," Jeanie faintly said.

The old man quietly did as she bade him; but his eyes watched her lovingly from beneath the folds, which prevented his hearing her voice. Esmé alone listened to the whispered confession; rambling, yet touching, in its frequent but quaint allusions and broken utterance of English.

"Miss Esmé, it was the deil tempted me," Jeanie continued, when she had finished telling her of her guilty acquaintance with Gupini, the Italian valet, at Dreumah; "there is no doubt o' that; but I feel humbly sure his work is done wi' me: the deil triumphed o'er me on the earth, but he'll no be fit to follow me or hinder me from heaven. I hae been repenting these many, many months. There's no one knows o' my disgrace but my aunt at Braemorin, and I think my father kens it now; and you know it, Miss Esmé: but I cannot bear to think that Ewen or his mother would ken it. I have na strength left to tell them and dint it into them the way my silly, vain, suffering self was glamour'd; and how I think now, and how I raved and screeched in the winter nights, thinkin' o' how the look o' yon black eyes and the unknown sound o' his flattering tongue were but the visible impersonations o' the deil himsel'. He won me then, but that is all worthless now: he has na won my soul; for I am sorry—sorry—sorry!" Her tears choked further utterance.

Esmé was very pale; for there was something awful in sitting thus alone by a death-bed, for the first time in her life.

and listening to a confession of guilt, which, at any refined and delicate mind would have shrunk from : was not the time for weak thoughts of self. She earnestly and impressively to Jeanie, urging her still to peace and inward prayer ; and then very gently she persuaded her to hint the truth to Florh.

"Because, Jeanie," she whispered, "you know how terrible she and Ewen were about your changed behaviour. I have reason to think that they laid the apparent blame upon another and guiltless person. Now you would not wish that any injustice should be connected with your repentance?"

"I could na thole Ewen to ken for whom I prefer. I don't think I could mention yon foreign name : na tell him that ; the scandalization would be ower Jeanie said restlessly.

"Well, at any rate, tell Florh this :—that you assure was not any one of higher degree than yourself. Or solemnly, if you prefer that, that it was not an *English* neither gentle nor simple. You should do this, Jeanie, otherwise you will leave an impression of falseness, which should not for a moment allow. Clear this to them, at Jeanie : a very few words will do. Florh will not let you in your present weak state ; and do not think she will vilify your memory. No ; whatever you say will never be buried with her, I am sure."

Jeanie sighed deeply. "Weel, weel ! the more I tell myself the better. I will try and tell the whole story. I'm no fit for that, I will certainly take the blame off at Never doubt, Miss Esmé, ere the dawn I'll say (should be my last words) that no Englishman had to do with my father now I am wearying for my father. I have one request that he wad bury me in the kirk-yard at Braemore : I can show him the spot, near to a little wee mound of sward that was planted there not two months ago. I little wee one waiting to keep me company in the morning dinna tell this to Ewen."

Esmé heard the tones of an approaching man's voice coming in Gaelic and weeping ; and she told Jeanie her father was coming. The next moment he entered with Florh, and went out ; her foster-mother followed her, and they sat in solemn quiet of a night among the hills. An hour Jeanie's strength began rapidly to sink ; and sudden

and her father declared that the only thing left to sustain him would be some wine. As in the old days of Scripture, so these primitive people, wine is often considered the great remedy for declining life, or cure of hopeless wounds. Donald cried urgently for wine, and wrung his hands over his ailing daughter. Where could wine be got at that place or time? The answer was ready; both Florh and Esmé Dreumah, which, by the hill track from there, might be got in about half an hour.

The way lay principally through a dark boggy ravine, and by the sides of lonely little tarns, until it issued upon the banks of the Nightach at the back of the lodge; and it was haunted, not by kelpies and bogles, but by the restless ghost of a dead pedlar, whose commemorative cairn stood on a hillside, and who was believed to wander there night and day with the bones of his pack, which had been sunk, rifled, in the bog.

Cameron could not go, for Jeanie now held his hand in her parting grasp, imploring him to leave her no more: he would not bear to die and leave her alone. Ian Mohr's feeble strength would make too long delay, and so Florh said she would Esmé, on her pony, would come with her: the strong-woman was weak where native superstition came in the Esmé told her to bring the pony round from the shed where he was stabled, while she said a last prayer by Jeanie's side. It was now nearly twelve o'clock; but Esmé would not be direct from Dreumah. She promised to return, were she still in life, the next evening, which was Sunday. Jeanie

Esmé, and whispered that she would tell Florh the whole about herself, when the latter came back with the wine, and that she would hope for some of that forgiveness from Florh which he now trusted to find from Heaven. Ere they started, they approached the fire and threw in Normal's letter, which had been saved until it was consumed to ashes. As they drew near Dreumah, they consulted on how to apply for admittance: at least for Florh, as Esmé would of course be out of sight. Florh said she had heard that Lord Darnley, Sir Edward Cressingham had gone for a day to a shooting some distance off, and that Mr. Marchmoram had his hill pony to be in readiness to take him to Glenloch that evening; consequently only Mr. Auber would be home, and likely gone to bed; while the English valets would be loath to rise and open the door to a Gaelic summons at that hour,

"But deed," she continued, "now I'm thinking, sure, but I heard the two lords that have arrived at shooting went to Dreumah to-day, and no that an Dreumah gentlemen went to them; an' if this is the case he sitting up with Mr. Anber, and my knock will be them whether the valets hear it or no. I think we'll round about quietly an' keek in at the window, when them sitting at their wine, if they are there."

It was a relief to emerge shortly after on the bank Nightach, and to hear sounds of life issuing from the baying hounds in the kennel close at hand. Esmé to a tree, which was scorched by the smoke from fires she had helped to kindle there a few days ago she and Florh quietly moved on, and came out from into the amphitheatre in front. It was beautiful; and eerie like the sunken track they had followed, with tints of warm green, purple, and gray, in the silucent moonlight. The lodge was lighted up; the sitting-room was wide open, and the murmur of distinctly heard on the summer night air. Esmé put back, as they stood upon the crisp natural grassy said,

"Sit down for a moment, Florh, and then we'll look: I don't know whether it is the warm perfume or the few last hours in Jeanie's cottage, but I feel it."

Florh looked at her; she was certainly very pale. taken off her riding-skirt when she reached the cottage was now in her high white evening dress, her hair braided and a white handkerchief tied loosely round her head of her straw hat, which was not so cool. No spirit mournfully over past scenes, could have looked more than did Esmé at this moonlight hour. She sat down on the heather bank, and with eyes fixed upon the open space sighed deeply.

"Florh, I don't know what strange feeling is over you go on alone, and see who is there, and then knock back door of the lodge? I won't go nearer than this."

"What for, my bairn? what ails you?"

"I don't know. Florh, there is such a curious sentiment over me; I could not describe it: a presentiment something were going to happen. I feel it! I wish home: perhaps a thunder-storm is coming on."

"Rouse up, rouse up, methal gaolach! (dear day

let fancies or freams come over you : it's no like you," Florh replied, soothingly. Then, as Esmé still sat without moving, she sat down too, right opposite her, and a curious expression came over her face. She put her hand on Esmé's, and looked at her with eyes glittering strangely, like a snake's ; her voice took the fascinating power of its gaze also. She spoke with a convincing force which carried Esmé's imagination and belief with it, and stimulating them, gave her strength to rise and obey.

"Don't let fancies trouble you," she said, "but listen. If ye hae a presentiment, so have I : Esmé, Esmé, it was travelling wi' me every step here the night ; an' when you said just now you had a presentiment, the words louped back to my heart. Ye know that strange freams hae been given to me ; that my readings o' dreams hae a name o'er the whole country : that I am seldom wrong where I choose to speak ; that uncanny things hae happened, o' the coming o' which I had given warning. Weel, when ye stepped ben the cottage the night, I did not speak ; for my eyes were fixed, and my tongue needed to be spell-bound, watching curious things connected wi' ye in the fire ashes. It's coming ! Ye may greet sair ; for I saw tears : there was peril, and there was rejoicing : but strengthen yourself. Rise up now : the sough o' your name reaches me here. Gae to yon window : and here I bid you, in the name of great Roi' Orduchadh (destiny), to stand still, and if you hear your own name not to turn away."

"Florh," replied Esmé, rising up, "I am not going to listen !" and she smiled for a moment, almost amusedly, at the suggestion so evidently conveyed. But her foster-mother's face remained darkened in its earnestness, as she replied,

"Child, go on, and see who is sitting there ; for it's out o' yon open window that the power o'er you comes. It's within there. I am going round, an' when I get the wine, I'll come quiet for you back again."

Florh slid away with the noiseless tread of a wild cat, while Esmé moved on under the shadow of the lodge ; she reached the window, and from behind its projecting wooden ledge looked in. The hart's-horn chandelier was blazing brightly with waxen lights ; the red frieze curtain, that, when the nights grew cool in autumn, would be drawn across the window, now hung by the side, throwing reflected glow from the burning embers in the low turf grate upon the figures of Marchmont and Anber, reclining easily in their comfortable chairs. They

were the sole occupants of the room : the other two have gone to Dalcarra. Newspapers, cigars, books, were on the table ; and the little bedroom doors, marked No. 8, stood invitingly open. Auber yawned ; Esmé looked in ; but Marchmoram was sitting with his most composed expression, his lips drawn rather down, his eyes fixed in inward meditation on the fire : he sat in his chair and sat with his back towards the window, lolled, with head thrown back, in dreamy repose. The sentiment that chained her feet so irresistibly to the Esmé could not move : she stood like one in a state of leprosy, or as if Florio, who stood in the shadow opposite, had thrown her into a mesmeric trance. He spoke first : the musical tones of his voice struck upon Esmé's ear.

" Well, Godfrey, you must be wending South so soon ? and then our old days of friendship will begin to a close."

Marchmoram replied, with a slight low laugh,

" I cannot speak from experience, Herbert ; but I have a pretty strong conviction that this will not follow in our footsteps."

" And I may say that I believe you," Auber said to his friend ; " I think I know you sufficiently for the qualities of the other person, he ' who runs in the family ' that they are not such as to indulge any jealous weakness. They are a pair of strong minds, and will act independently of each other, theless," he continued, with head thrown back, " this will separate us more."

Marchmoram did not immediately reply ; and when he did it was to say very abruptly,

" Herbert, have you really no thoughts whatsoever of leaving ? I should like to see you driven to that state."

" Me, Godfrey ! no, not I," Auber replied. " But now we are alone, I want to lay my case before you, and you to help me if you can : if not, you ought, at least, to feel remorse ; for you, I suspect, are the cause of my hopelessness. Do you recollect a little theory I opened in our last conversation on that confounded Lucio's death, by-the-by, I am glad Gupini has ascertained that of cultivating intimate acquaintance with a fresh mind ; a sort of Platonic love, that gives one power and responsibility."

Here—Marchmoram striking the fire-irons with

accidentally (for he muttered at the noise that ensued when they came clattering down)—Auber was interrupted for a moment ; but he went on, in the subsequent silence, with perfect equanimity.

“ Well, you knew very well where I pointed, and you showed no discouragement then ; save merely asking, with a brotherly kind of interest, whether what was play to me, might not prove deadly to her ? Was it not so ? ”

Esmé's eyes had been fixed upon Marchmoram all the while she was gazing through the open window : they had never once turned to Auber ; though she might have seen the face of the latter from where she stood. Her expression of agonized suspense was terrible ; and later, when she heard the more cruel words, an on-looker might have traced horror in the burning dilated eye and half-opened lip : but it was the horror of a passionate, injured woman.

Marchmoram gave a little laugh, and replied :

“ That was kind of me, and as much as could have been expected ; for I have never seen your power fail where you chose to exert it, Herbert : and I had some feeling of pity here ! ”

“ But,” pursued Auber, “ I am going to put you on your defence : I suspect that when I spoke to you then, you had been before, or rather after, me ; for you left this part of the country later than I did last year. I suspect you were the selfish one, Godfrey, and that you have robbed me of the bloom of my Highland water-lily.”

“ You are mistaken,” was the reply.

Esmé could not now see Marchmoram's face, for he had turned to confront Auber during the last speech ; nor did she detect the exact tone of his voice : she merely heard the words as they fell distinct and heavy on her heart, as a death-knell.

“ I ought to be mistaken,” Auber replied, “ but I fear I am not : you thought the toilsome pursuit of ambition required some recreation, and, without remorse, you rob me of my coveted plaything for an hour's solace for yourself. Was this fair ? ”

“ Pshaw ! you know well I have for some time been engaged to Lady Ida Beauregard,” Marchmoram replied, with forced calmness.

A convulsive sound, as of impeded respiration, made both men start and turn their heads towards the window. All was

quiet and still without. Such like sounds are sometimes heard on the night air, when the living world is at rest : perhaps it was a vagrant gust of wind sobbing from the hill.

Auber resumed the conversation.

"Of course I do ; but that does not weaken my argument. If, in your bachelor pursuit of Lady Ida, you required such mental relaxation as philandering, you may go farther than flirtation at a future time."

"No, no," Marchmoram replied, sinking his voice deeper ; "the tie that thus binds me for ever to my future busy political life, should surely satisfy me. Every year, as I grow older, the fires of youthful passion will fade away before colder habit : I know well enough what marriage is sometimes ; and what my marriage with Lady Ida is to be."

Esmé did not mark the bitter zest with which his words were spoken : to her they sounded but exultant throughout. That first astounding declaration, spoken so decidedly, in his own calm, clear voice, paralyzed her. The sudden blow fell upon her with a stunning force that deadened sensation for the moment : it astounded her, not only by its unexpectedness, but by the accidental and unintentional manner of its infliction. The careless ease, cool self-possession, and unconscious indifference of Marchmoram, amazed and confounded her : it was like a momentary glimpse into the future, where she read her doom. Her faculties were benumbed by the shock of this cruel revelation. She pressed her temples against the cold stone wall, and tried to mutter a prayer for strength to move from the spot. By the time that Esmé had recovered herself, Marchmoram had nodded good-night to Auber, who lounged into his room, leaving the door open. There was perfect stillness : the midnight air was serene and sultry. Marchmoram had risen and stood leaning upon the mantelpiece, his head upon his arms, when suddenly a wailing voice broke the stillness : it was wafted in like a sigh. "Ah ! Godfrey, farewell !" The strong man started and shook with emotion : the sweat stood on his brow. In a moment he rushed forward and sprang from the window out upon the heather ; his eye fell upon a white floating figure, vanishing like a wraith over the ridge of the foremost hill that sloped down upon dark Loch Nightach. Florie was standing near to him in the shadow, but he saw her not. She had been long standing there, with the bottle of wine, that had been given her half an hour before by a sleepy servant, held under her plaid. But should Jeanie Cameron

have died for want of the stimulant she had purposely come for, she would not have stirred until Esmé had moved. When Esmé turned to fly, Florh's outstretched hand had failed in arresting her footsteps as she rushed past. Marchmoram paced restlessly up and down in the moonlight, and gave vent to the feelings which he had so well concealed from his friend. He spoke audibly.

"Esmé, Esmé, I will tell thee all: how I have been led on, how I swore revenge, how for years we rivalled each other. I dare not refuse the grasp of life now within my reach. Ambition must first be served: it has longest reigned—it is the strongest, and I must give up thee. Oh, Esmé! who but you will ever hear, or truly know, the cost of my ambitious marriage, and the strength of the love that it uprooted here!"

Florh had crept quickly away, following Esmé's track, until she came down to the tree on the bank of the loch where the pony had been tied. It was not there; but the marks of its hoofs in the soft ground further on, showed that Esmé had ridden it on towards home. It was doubly lonesome and eerie, retracing the haunted mossy way back to Jeanie's cottage alone. When Florh reached it, Donald Cameron told her Miss Esmé had arrived some time before, and had stayed a moment with Jeanie, who was now sleeping quietly; she had then put on her plaid and riding skirt, and gone on to Glenbenrough, which she would not take long to reach, the pony seemed so fresh and so anxious to get home.

CHAPTER XXVI.

RETRIBUTION.

When grief was calm and hope was dead,
Late, late in the gloamin Kilmeny came hame;
And oh! her beauty was fair to see,
But still and steadfast was her e'e:
Such beauty bard may never declare,
For there was neither pride nor passion there.

The Queen's Wake.

We shall reap of the works we then sow,
When the stars are dissolved in the sky.—SCOTT.

We left Esmé flying, as if from an impending fate. She had passed the first dark, dreary part of her road—the bleak

morass and scowling, leafless hills ; and the trance-like of her mind was dispelled by the active exercise. She emerged on the beautiful route from Dreumah, amidst heathered heights ; and the pony's hoofs splashed through the foaming river Rouagh, which crossed the road here in great depth, the water sparkling and flashing in the moonlight. It was not far from the clump of weeping birches and suckle covered rocks near Lochandhu, where was the place she so well remembered. The night was calm and still, its silence was broken only by the hoarse, unceasing croak of the corn-craik, echoing from the little far-spread cultivation, golden with the yellow glow of ripening corn, and the sterile hills around. The pony now walked, the bridle hanging loose upon its neck, and Esmé sat upright in her saddle, her figure swaying easily to Suila's measured pace. The sky was clear, and its ethereal blue unclouded, and she looked upward, the star-gemmed vault of heaven, so palpable, seemed to her an image of the ocean of ether. Her countenance was unearthly in its clearness, and with a heavenly serenity, like the face of a saint : there was neither pallor nor flush on it : her eyes beamed full and clear, their lustre undimmed by tears, and no shade of bitter contraction of distress marred the white and thoughtful brow. She could not look back on the past ; her gaze was fixed on her thoughts fixed on the divine source of strength and comfort. As she drew near to the Rona Pass, a change came over the sky ; the moon, which hung high above Craigh-na-Duibhne, vanished behind the peaks of higher hills ; shadows, as almost to be palpable, succeeded, spreading over the face of the earth : Esmé thought of "the darkest day." Soon the air became heavy and sultry, and a lightning flashed fitfully on the horizon, shedding more brightness across her path, which the next instant was darkness. She had now no fear ; the silent lightning seemed to typify the gleams of hope that lightened her dark path. She was near the Rona Pass, and amongst the weeping birches alighted ; Suila standing quietly cropping the heath, occasionally snorting a gentle invitation to proceed. She looked up at the heavens, now again star-bespangled, dark clouds had parted ; and then, as she would soon be home, she prepared herself to enter with a strong heart. Sinking on her knees, she prayed fervently for relief. Believed and calmed by her supplication, she re-

and, as the pony began the ascent of the Roua Pass, her thoughts reverted to Jeanie Cameron, lying penitent on her death-bed. The thought crossed her mind that she would fain change places with that dying girl if she could; but she repelled the despairing feeling as impious: though a scalding tear fell as a thought of Normal succeeded. It was dark, for the moon had set, and Esmé tied the bridle to the pommel of the saddle, knowing it was best to leave her pony's footing wholly unassisted. She sat with her hands clasped upon her knee and eyes averted from the shadowy scene around, when a slight sound roused her attention, and she started as a man suddenly rose from the path before her. His lighted cigar showed her the swarthy features of the Italian Gupini, his white teeth gleaming as, politely saluting her, he laid his hand on the pony's neck. He spoke in a low, rapid tone, and she scarcely knew what he said, except that he hoped to get a bed at Glenbenrough, as he was returning from Lochandhu, where he had found the cottage locked and no one within. He walked by the pony's head, on the side next the precipice, Esmé keeping silence. They were slowly rounding the Pass: another step and they would be on the broad surface of the hill; when a voice shouted from the height above, sounding almost in their ears, "Dioghaltas!" (revenge). It was instantaneously followed by a sharp report, which shook the midnight air. Suila bounded madly forward—gave one wild plunge—and Esmé, the pony, and the valet, were seen no more!

Glenbenrough was lying awake as he often did: it is a habit with men who have led very active lives, when they reach his age. He was thinking of his three daughters: of his Norah, so happily married; of little Ishbel, growing up the delight of his eyes; and of his bright sunny Esmé, whose youthful promise ripened daily in advancing womanhood. Would the fate of these two dawn bright as Norah's? If so, then would his old age indeed be trebly blessed. These sweet musings were rudely dispelled by the report of a gun or pistol discharged in the direction of the Roua Pass. It was an unusual sound at that hour, and, forgetting it was not yet August, he thought of poachers after the grouse. He sat up and listened; all was utterly still, so he lay down again, debating whether he should get up or not. His deter-

mination yet wavered, when suddenly an awful sound burst upon his ear,—the yell of a human being in agony. The shrieks echoed faster and louder, as, borne on the western breeze, they came nearer to the house. Glenbenrough leaped up and threw the window open; and, though a strong-nerved man, drops of sweat stood on his brow, so fearful was that shrieking! Ere he had time to slip on his shoes, a step came rushing past upon the gravel, and the next moment Ewen Mackenzie had dashed himself against the sill of the open window. Never did the midnight moon look down on mortal face more ghastly with horror! Worn and attenuated with three days' fasting on the hills, his long red hair hanging tangled and matted, and his gray starting eyes glaring through blood that streamed from his temple, which he had struck against some tree in his headlong speed: Ewen, with a cry of agonized despair, almost flung himself upon the appalled Glenbenrough, exclaiming,

"Help! help! I have shot her! Your daughter's down the Roua Pass!"

On what a scene did the morning sun rise, shortly after! On strong-lined faces of speechless men, stalwart and young, tottering and aged, clustered on the Roua Pass; some with crouching gait hanging over the edge of the precipice, others with strong but tremulous grasp clinging to its slippery jagged sides, as painfully they followed the reckless and perilous descent of the distracted father. From the topmost bough of a birch hung Esmé's plaid, suspended there in her headlong fall from the Pass above; further down, almost on the river brink, a dark mass was seen: it was Gupini, stretched on the rock, with his feet in the water and a bullet through his brain. But, except the plaid, there was no trace of Esmé or of her pony. The pistol which had been discharged was found upon the Pass, and recognized as one of Nornal's; it was the very one that Esmé had polished at Lochandhu on that winter day of Huistan's death, her name scratched by herself upon the stock was visible: it had been kept warm in Ewen's breast for three days past. He had reached the Roua Pass with it only a few hours ere he fired it; having, that Saturday morning, met the Dreumah gillie many miles from there, who told him Mr. Marchmoran was sure to go to Glenbenrough in the course of the evening, or at night. At last, poor Sula, the Highland pony which had carried Esmé over, was discovered.

Ewen's tame fox, which had joined the search from Lochandhu, was observed seated on the bank opposite, with pointed ears and scenting nose, watching a raven that had perched upon the pommel of the saddle, which protruded above the surface of one of the deepest pools in the river. The pony lay underneath ; and it was here the water must be dragged.

Some hours later, Marchmoram and Auber stood with their friends in the warmth before the lodge, whistling to their dogs gambolling on the grass and impatient for the hour to bid them start over the hills to the parish church, when a messenger suddenly brought word that Esmé lay dead at Glenbenrough. Incredulity succeeded to the amazement which the first shock of the dismal tidings produced ; but when the messenger solemnly affirmed the truth of what he said, and described the circumstances of Esmé's death, then the contrast of character was strikingly shown in the effect upon the two men. Auber broke forth in exclamations of astonishment and sorrow, questioning the messenger on every particular ; while Marchmoram stood motionless with knit brow and downcast eyes, the tears streaming down his sunburnt face. It was known that Miss Esmé had died last night, the messenger said, and that she had been killed in mistake for Marchmoram ; for the man who had done it was her own foster-brother, who had loved her dearly but had ever hated him. There were wailing, weeping crowds upon the Rona Pass ; he had seen her plaid, taken off the tree, in her father's hand, and there were some spots of blood upon it ; the shattered carcase of her pony lay on the turf side by side with the dead body of Gupini. When he left, they were dragging the pool out of which the pony had been taken, and in which they knew Esmé also had found her cold watery grave. Marchmoram heard all in silence, and then bounded away from amongst the men gathered there : like a wounded stag, he kept aloof that day, unseen, alone, upon the hills. No one approached him, no mortal eye saw him until he came down at night and went straight into the cell-like solitude of his chamber. There was utter silence in the lodge. Auber had left to go South some hours before : he was looking ghastly pale and ill ; the suddenness of the catastrophe having given a severe shock to his nervous system. He feared becoming ill at that lonely spot, Dreumah, in the midst of painful and depressing associations : what would become of

him there, in a nervous fever, without medical aid and surrounded by friends mourning the loss of one so dear to them? He must quit the place at once: once in the South, he would conquer all sad recollections and foolish self-upbraidings, and be able, by-and-by, to class poor Esmé's fate, and his past intimacy with her, among the sadly-pleasing, soothing memories of bygone days.

Who shall depict the feelings of the heart-broken father, as he sat mute, with bowed head and deeply-furrowed face, his sunken eyes, tearless and glazed, watching from a little distance the men dragging the pool, from which he expected every moment to emerge the lifeless form of his drowned child? His clothes hung dusty and torn upon him, and the haggard look of one worn out with distressful excitement and fatigue, showed that nature was well-nigh exhausted. He was almost stupefied with grief; and when Ishbel, who had gone wailing madly up and down the river banks all the morning, flitted wildly past him, he merely bent his head a little lower; but when the next moment he felt a woman's hand laid gently on his shoulder, he could not bear the touch: a nervous thrill of consciousness made him start and throw it off. It was Florh. Her face was flushed to crimson, and her words came forth in hot hurried gasps. She grasped Ishbel tightly with one hand, as she bent down to speak to Glenbenrough.

"I hae just come here, I hae just come here! And now, oh! tell me, laird, how knew you that she fell down there? I see the trail o' that ill-fared lad who perished wi' lies on his lips an' in his heart. God gave him as the rightfu' victim. An' I hae seen the very broken bush 'gainst which first the pony dashed in its downfa'; but for our Esmé, I hae nae found but her shoe no ten feet down the brae."

Glenbenrough looked up vacantly.

"Aye, nought falls to the ground without our God's permission! Laird, my beloved laird," she whispered excitedly, "have hope!"

Glenbenrough, with a wild look, as if suddenly awakened from a trance, was in a moment on his feet; his eyes lit up with eagerness, and he seized her arm.

"Florh, Florh, what is it? speak!"

"Hush, then, hush! I promised to keep it quiet: all this was unkent. Your bairn's safe asleep on my bed at Loch andhu!"

With a deep sigh of relief, the father fell upon his knees and offered up thanks to God for this mercy ; and Ishbel, throwing her arms around his neck, mingled her tears of joy with his. Florh stood by and thus explained the circumstances.

"I was coming frae Jeanie Cameron's deathbed, early in the dawn, when I met our Esmé. At first I thought it was her spirit afore me : her bonny gouden hair was dabbled wi' blood—for her head is cut a little—and her white dress looked like the graive claithes. What a' had happened I could not rightly divine, for her brain seemed a little wandering ; but I made it out forbye. At the foot o' the hill she had met that poor dark-minded lad (oh ! to think that his and Jeanie's souls went forth together to judgment !) and he walked up beside her. Then that shot was fired." (Here Florh struck her breast.) "Oh, hone ! oh, hone a rie ! Gupini fell down like a flash, and in the pony's first wild loup, our Esmé fell off too ; but she was stayed,—ye may see noo the very trunk o' the tree which stopped her fall, and her shoe lying by it yet,—while the pony gave a mad bound further on, ere it went crashing down into the deep water beneath. Our Esmé may have lain an hour there ; an' when she came to her senses, the only feeling she had, poor young mindfu' thing, was to save her father and sister from the shock o' her frightsome appearance ; and sae, when she had dragged hersel' up, she came slowly on to me. She lies now in quiet, but living sleep ; an' I hae gien her the sleeping drops that will keep her sae till night. Ye will no come near her the day, O laird ; but tomorrow ye 'll baith welcome her home. An' now let me return to her, an' to my ain sad thochts." And Florh wiped her brow as she ceased. The search for Esmé was now stayed. In a few trembling earnest words of thanks and praise, those unwearied sympathizing friends were told by their beloved laird of his daughter's safety ; and then, leaning on Ishbel, Glenbenrough took his homeward way rejoicing.

Florh retraced her steps to Lochandhu. She gently opened the door and entered her cottage on tiptoe ; it was all dark within, save the light of a smouldering peat fire on the hearth ; and all silent, save a low murmur of breathing from the bed. Florh stood for a time watching Esmé in her deep quiet sleep : the light was just sufficient to show the pallor of her face ; for she had lost much blood from the wound on her head. Her foster-mother stooped down and kissed her brow, muttering, "*Saved, saved !*" ere she turned away to her low sett

by the fire. And there Florh sat from that mid-day until night ; rocking herself to and fro in the darkness, and weeping and moaning over the wilfully blasted fortunes of her ill-governed son : she "neither rose up to eat nor to drink." When the sun went down she opened the window shutter, and at last Esmé awoke in the gloaming light ; but there was silence betwixt her and her foster-mother, save that once Esmé faintly said,

"Florh, let me lie here until to-morrow, and then I'll go home."

That return home, and the meeting with her father and sister, may be imagined. As one rescued from the dead was Esmé welcomed back by them. Holy and happy was their rejoicing : deep and grateful the joy at Glenbenrough. Esmé was much weakened by her accident, and her nervous system had received a severe shock : she was confined to her room for a time, and the doctor recommended a subsequent change of air and scene ; but in the meantime the quieter she was kept the better.

And what of the wretched murderer ? Dragged along by his mother's arm, he was hurried, raving and cursing, to the sea shore. With frantic bitterness she goaded him on with Jeanie's dying confession that his friend and confidant, Gupini, had been *his* enemy and *her* seducer. She assured him that, though the Providence which had saved the life of his innocent foster-sister had put the rightful victim in his way, yet as he had not known that at the time, he must still ever consider his revenge as denied to him, while yet the bloodguiltiness was on his soul. Had he not now, by his frowardness, ruined his mother and himself ? By his sullen vindictiveness he had brought her old age to sorrow, and heaped ignominy for ever on his name. Four Highlanders of his clan forced him, against his will, into a boat waiting there ; they pushed off and rowed him along the western coast, and out until they reached a rocky island, where a ship, bound for foreign lands, lay harbouring. As the boat went lessening in the distance, with Ewen seated in dogged and gloomy silence, Florh stood upon the rocky beach and, with outstretched hands, waved him off, crying shrilly—her voice heard above the noise of the sea birds—

"Go ! go ! I never may hear o' thee more ; and thou daarest never, never return !"

When they reached the ship, Ewen was put aboard. On a

far distant burning shore he was left, to find his own way and live as best he could ; or die, if so he chose. He lived : but in Scotland he was never heard of more.

About a week after Esmé's escape, the night before March-moram left Dreumah, he came out from the lodge at midnight to take a long walk. His face was as pale, and his eyes burned as restlessly, as on that night when he rode from Thistlebank to Glenbenrough. Outward nature was very similar too : it was a fitful night of alternate bright and gloom : the wind went souging and moaning through the crazy mountain pines, and the shadows flitted in grim, grotesque shapes over the rocky heights, darkly and silently vanishing, exactly as they did on that former night when he went, as now, to visit his sleeping love. The moon came floating out upon the deep blue heavens, and poured down her silver floods of light upon the gray old house of Glenbenrough, as March-moram reached the heights of the Roua Pass and sat him down full in view of it. He took from out his breast a crumpled letter which had been written by Esmé four-and-twenty hours after her escape. Several times he read it over ; though he knew it almost by heart. There he sat and gazed on the old familiar house : her window was darkened ; all was cold, silent, and still. Thus she had bidden him farewell :—

"I write to bid you adieu. You will have been sorry to hear of my accident ; but, so far as I am concerned, it was well for me.

"It was on that night I heard of your intended marriage. You must well know the shock it gave me, for I heard it cruelly from yourself—how, matters not now : from that night my life henceforth commenced anew. I have prayed God to enable me to forget and forgive you. I never, never wish to see you again on earth ; and willingly I will not.

"Sincerely do I hope you may find happiness as well as prosperity in your marriage.

"ESMÉ MAC NEIL."

After again reading the letter, he tore the paper into small pieces and scattered them down the Pass, watching the stream float the fragments away. There he sat alone, brooding in bitterness and grief on the past, and waging war against all earthly ties ; devoting himself anew to the master passion—the mocking phantasm of ambition—to whose allurements

had so ruthlessly sacrificed the gentle and guileless girl, who loved him as no other had done. As the early dawn broke, wild-eyed animals—the fox, the hare, and the roe—came out of the birch-wood coverts and gazed wonderingly upon him, ere they turned to scent or nibble through the dewy heather and glistening grass; the birds began to sing, and the hawks to cry from the giddy heights as they wheeled to and fro in search of prey; and soon the sun's rays, struggling through the mists, shed warmth and brightness over the grand solitude around. With sealed lips and dark steadfast eyes, Marchmoram retraced his steps, to proceed in a few hours from Dreumah to England, bearing with him that last sad memory of the Highlands.

For many months Esmé made slow progress towards recovery; but when her father proposed a tour for her, himself, and Ishbel, as the best and most agreeable tonic, she gently resisted, saying she was better in the Highlands: she only required time and quiet there to get well. At last he proposed moving to Arduashien for a time; a wild and secluded place, where the air was more bracing than at Glenbenrough. Thither Esmé did not object to go; it ever had been as a second home to them all. So they went, and remained there nearly a year. Esmé and Ishbel were as daughters in the house, and under the constant motherly care of Mrs. Mac Alastair, they led a healthful and quiet life. Esmé's bloom slowly returned, as the past faded away into the dim realm of forgetfulness; but as yet she seldom smiled. Norah and her husband were still abroad. Florh remained at Lochandhu, but went occasionally to Arduashien: she was still sad and restless; and Ishbel would try to get Esmé away when Florh burst forth into one of her wild laments for her son. Yet there were gleams of sunshine cheering her strong heart, for she always spoke of the certainty of her Normal's return; and then in her love for him, she would exclaim that he was left to her as a son: now the nearest and dearest of all. Normal was still a wanderer abroad, and he did not write very frequently, though Florh sometimes wrote to him; yet there was a deep and strong sympathy that bound him to his Highland home, and he counted the hours until that time should arrive when he could feel he might return. At other times a feverish sort of life or hope seemed hanging over Florh: she would say to Esmé,—

“Think ye that I would bear up 'gainst my weary weird as

I do, methal gaolach, were there no a purpose left for me yet in life? No, no, my darling; it's not any hope for mysel'! All that is done: Ewen banished and Huistan dead! Poor old withered Florh, lopped of her branches, is now but a blasted, dying trunk. Even though the bright time come to those she still loves, there will be no transplanting for her: 'Where the tree fell, there let it lie.' I'll die in my ain old hame at Lochandhu. But I hae a mission yet to go through wi': a bit travel to take, and a message to gie; an' I am longing it werè over before I may die." She would also sometimes ask Ishbel quietly if there were no news in the English papers. At last Ishbel said to her one day,—

"Florh, I see by this morning's paper that Mr. Marchmoram is to be married on the 29th."

CHAPTER XXVII.

TIES THAT SEVER AND TIES THAT BIND.

LUATH.—But will ye tell me, Master Cæsar,
Sure great folks' life's a life o' pleasure?

CÆSAR.—L—d man, were ye but whyles where I am,
The gentles ye wad ne'er envy them;
There's sic parade, sic pomp an' art,
The joy can scarcely reach the heart.

BURNS's *Twa Dogs*.

Speed on, O time! the happy day.—CAMPBELL.

ON the day when the Lady Ida Beauregard accepted Godfrey Marchmoram, the intended marriage of her father with Lady Jane Trevor was publicly announced: and it was supposed that both weddings would come off about the same time. It was from a firm conviction of her father's coming marriage that Lady Ida took that opposing step of safety, and she hurried on the day of her own escape. It was now too late to retract, when she suddenly found, only the night before, that the duke had quarrelled with his intended bride, that the match was broken off, and that he had foresworn from that day all further acquaintance with the Lady Jane Trevor. This unexpected turn of events strangely affected Lady Ida. She, being blinded by passion, had entirely overlooked the possibility of the match being broken off; a want of foresight to

lowered for ever her own estimation of her skill in social diplomacy. Could she have foreseen that the duke would have acted thus, she never would have married Godfrey Marchmoram; for the idea of marriage was to her hateful and repugnant; she rebelled against the tie. Her interest in Marchmoram had ever been strong; but she would fain have kept him to her chariot wheels, and enjoyed the triumph of seeing him there: never, never would she have permitted him to share the seat with her; much less to direct its course. She now yielded to what seemed bitter necessity. It was too late to draw back: she would be compromised, humiliated, were she to do so; for she would be regarded as rejected. The wedding-day arrived; a brilliant throng of rank and fashion witnessed the sacred rite which joined two proud, ambitious, and rebellious natures in a bond that both loathed, and would fain have evaded, but dare not. With serene, smiling fortitude, these two lofty and strong spirits bowed themselves to the matrimonial yoke, compelled by false shame and worldly interest. Unholy to them were the solemn vows, that were belied even in the act of taking; unblessed the union of these two beings, whose hearts now revolted from each other, and whose souls more than ever dwelt apart. The honeymoon was to be passed at Mr. Marchmoram's country seat, about thirty miles from London. On the morning after the wedding and the arrival there of the "happy couple," Marchmoram sat alone at breakfast; Lady Ida had not made her appearance yet, and would not, perhaps, for some hours. He sat at a table luxuriously spread, but his appetite seemed cloyed, and he was evidently in one of his absent moods, for a powdered footman had addressed him twice ere he turned round to ask, rather sharply, what the man wanted. The reply was strange; a peasant woman, peculiarly dressed, who said she was from the Highlands of Scotland, was most troublesomely anxious to see him: her name was Florh Mackenzie. Marchmoram desired the man to show her up, and then he rose from his seat; his cheek flushed, and a rush of ideas passed through his brain. Had Esmé sent a message to him through her foster-mother? Was there any dying call to Glenbenrough? He drank hastily a glass of water, as the door was thrown open and he heard the firm step of the Highland woman advancing. Florh wore her Highland clanking brogues, and her shepherd plaid was thrown over her shoulders and head. the footman ushered her in he put a pocket-handkerchief

to his nose; the peaty smoke flavour from Florh's plaid being too strong for his delicate senses; but to Marchmoram it came as perfume fresh from the hills, and carried his memory instantaneously back to the Highlands. Florh looked much older than when she had last curtsied to him in the entrance hall of Glenbenrough; her hair had turned gray, and the lines on her face were marked stronger by grief and care. As Marchmoram with bland voice accosted her, and offered her a chair, she drew herself stiffly up, and replied in quick accent, "Aneil," (No). She slowly surveyed the splendid room (would it not be a picture to take back?) and observed all the magnificence and wealth displayed in the furniture and ornaments. Between the centre windows, hung with rich draperies of purple and gold, was a portrait, painted in oils, of Lady Ida, in her drawing-room train and plumes, and with a colour on the cheek which was wanting in the original. Florh turned her keen gray eyes alternately from this picture to the bridegroom before her. Mr. Marchmoram did not sit down, and he spoke courteously.

"I hope all the family of Glenbenrough are well."

"Yes, sir; they are weel."

"Are they all at home at present?"

"No, sir: that bad accident sent them away for a time to a healthier place."

"Ah! I hope there have been no lasting bad effects," Marchmoram said, his lip twitching a little.

"No, sir; Miss Esmé is nigh as strong and weel as ever."

Then, with a wonderful look of self-possession, and an indescribable tone of concentration, Florh looked steadily at him and said,

"Mr. Marchmoram, I hae come up frae Lothandhu, a long gait—but I hae thought little of it—just to hae this word wi' you. Ye were very intimate at Glenbehrough; perhaps for that sake you'll hear it frae me noo?"

He bowed, and grasped firmly the back of the chair: she went on.

"Ye ken how that Italian lad was shot on the Rona Pass by my Ewen, in a mistake for you. He had made my Ewen believe that it was you wha had ruined the lassie Jeanie Cameron; and he had contrived to deceive mysel' as weel as Ewen in that, Mr. Marchmoram. Weel, this Italian lad *was* very intimate wi' me: he had made himsel' nigh as a son *me*; for he was clever, he was deep, and he was rest

minded. He needed aye to hae the occupation baith o' love and o' friendship, and he succeeded in playing the first wi' my Ewen's lassie, and in gieing the last to me. He had few secrets frae me; and latterly I contrived to read some that he did na quite wish to gie up to me. He had had a strange wild life o' it altogether, and mony a strange dark adventure. I want now just to tell one little bit o' his life to ye. Hae patience, hae patience, for ye'll find out most wondrously at the end how it affects ye: listen quietly, Mr. Marchmoram, to every word o' it. Nigh ten years ago now, Gupini was in England travelling with a group of strolling play actors. He was an Italian gentleman's son, I believe; an' he had gude blood in his veins, an' he had gude education too, an' he lo'ed poetry. But he oft told me how deevilry was naturally born in him, and how he had rin away, when a mere bairn, frae strict guardians, and how he always pleased himself gaily through the world. Weel, he was acting through the country when fate drew him an' the rest to an English 'toun,' near which there was a grand old castle; an' twa young girls lieved in it nearly their lane: the ane was a humble friend to the other. That was a grand place; there was a park, with avenues of oak, and grassy glades, and rich flower gardens, and quiet, slow, rinning waters. Gupini easily climbed the high walls of the deer park, an' he met the twa young girls. He had a friend, a wild English lad, who foregathered with the one that was no a lady; an' Gupini got the other to listen to him, while he taught her Italian poetry. They talked o' love under the simmer moonlight nights, an' they rambled through green woods without, an' through long deserted rooms an' wings of the grand old hoose within. I need na stop to explain to ye that which is nature. Was there never an untaught lassie glamour'd? an' has na a man's passionate eye, afore this, won return frae the highest lady in the land? One night the girls were missing; and who went in pursuit, but an old frail loving nurse—a woman older than me, but as fond o' her bairn as I now prove mysel' to be o' mine; and she haled back Gupini's ane. The other was nearer to her in blood, but she strove no for her as she did for this ane: she let her go, but she got this ane back. Gupini left the country: not for bribe or threat, but he just went away himsel'. And later, when he returned, he was ever fearful o' meeting her (equally with herself, I suppose); for he had a notion that she had ~~met~~ *high friends*, an' was so high hersel' that they would put him

out o' the way for fear o' the old time coming oot. He never forgot that time in his heart, though; an' he never parted with some bonny tokens, an' a loving childish letter, that he had got frae her." Here Florh fumbled with her hand under the folds of her plaid as she spoke. "One or two he did gie to Jeanie Cameron: I got them frae her; but these two I took mysel' from off his dead body. Will I show them to ye?"

The expression of Marchmoram's face had been latterly startling: a stony stare was in the eye, and his lip quivered now and then convulsively. More terrible was his suspense than poor Esmé's that night at Dreumah Lodge.

"Oh! what a high-born, high-titled lady ye hae got! Ye hae made a high marriage, and taken the highest branch on the tree; but, Mr. Marchmoram" (here Florh burst into a loud discordant laugh), "I must show it ye rotten and black to the core, crumbling into ashes in the hand o' the poor lone Highland wife. Look here! On my veritable conscience, I believe that Gupini, the Italian valet, seducer o' Jeanie Cameron, travelling play actor, was also the early an' secret love o' the Lady Ida Beauregard, your present prood, spotless bride."

And she threw upon the table a small glittering locket, with the name of Ida engraved on it, and an old letter folded square and worn at the edges with handling.

Marchmoram's look was fearful: with kindling eyes, lips compressed, clenching the arm of his chair, for a moment he stood dumb, fiercely glaring on her; but at last, with almost a yell, he exclaimed,—

"Devil! witch! it's a damnable lie!"

She bent forward her face, and, with an expression in it like the sly cruelty of the fox, she said,—

"Prove it! Read yon letter; compare the fine hair in the locket; and then look in your bonny leddy's face when ye ask her if she still minds Carlo Gupini!" Then, with shrieking fury, she shrilly mocked and twitted him in her wild, keen flow of broken English. "Ye suld come back to Glenbenrough, Mr. Marchmoram. It's true ye're going to Italy, and the Lady Ida will hae plenty to think on there o' her first meeting wi' the Italian 'mong the oaks and dells o' England. But tak her back to Glenbenrough, an' let her haud the rightsome wake o'er her first love's unwept grave! She may there gae out nightly to greet o'er his lonely burial-place."

He rushed forward, swept the tokens from the table, &

treading them under foot, stamped them into pieces, grinding his teeth as he did so.

"Begone!" he fiercely said.

"Aye, I'll go," Florh replied, retreating slowly backwards. "I now hae done my duty; which was to show ye your true choice. My fair rejected lily but droops her head awhile; she'll yet hold it up erect as ever, and as lovely. Your stately fox-glove is poisonous in the heart: it was blighted ere you took it."

He seized her roughly by the arm, and dragged her forcibly back a step. Pride and rage trembled for mastery in his face.

"Woman, tell me what bribe will secure your silence!"

"None," she replied with a look of withering scorn. "What use hae I o' your siller? I'll speak nae mair than yon dead man will. Ye hae nae married my bairn, an' your disgrace signifies noo nae mair to me than your happiness would. I hae nae mair on earth to do wi' ye. Live, and be proud o' ye're leddy."

And she quitted the room, as Marchmoram, with a groan, sank into his seat.

Lady Ida had dreaded the marriage tie; time, however, pleasantly undeceived her: she could scarce have believed the solemn ceremony might so easily betoken but the outward bond of mere social convenience; exemplifying that state of connubiality which she had so oft theorised to her own desire. Marchmoram offered none of the affectionate demonstration which she had so dreaded; and he neither interfered, nor dictated, nor sought to intermingle in her amusements; nor endeavoured to alter the bias of her views where they differed from his. The reins were left wholly to her: she went on her way, and he went his. As years wore on, his hair became slightly silvered, and the lines of his face grew deeper as his rising talent became more marked. His ambition had known no check; but it had cooled since its early aspirations. His character hardened daily. That gorgeous picture he had painted to Esmé, standing on the hill of Craighrisht, was realized: crowds of people sung his praises or sought his patronage, and noblemen of old titles bowed to him, and offered the incense of intellectual worship when he rose to address his fellow men. But this satisfied not. Besides

disappointments, mortifications, distrusts—one bitter, hateful secret haunted him ever on wakeful nights. All success seemed hollow and fruitless: his life was joyless. He never returned to the Highlands. How dreary, as age advanced, to feel there beat not a human pulse quickening its throb to his. There was no soul sympathising with him; no gentle human tie bound him to life; no sweet companion to brighten the last days with exquisite human lovingness; no child to hand down his name to posterity, and cheer his heart with present love and future hope. As years advanced, Lady Ida shrunk into a thin and stately observer of convenances; she seemed frozen into a formal propriety. In social intimacy there was more restraint betwixt them than frequently exists between mere acquaintance, for there was no mutual sympathy. Nothing was left to Marchmoram but that earthly ambition whose dictates he now must needs follow to the end:

Auber had not been undeceived as to the report of Esmé's tragical fate, until some days after his arrival in London; by which time his nerves had almost recovered the shock of the false intelligence. He became aware, later, that his theory of Platonic love was impracticable in this case; and he never returned to the neighbourhood of Glenbenrough, though he shot in other parts of the Highlands. There was, however, a threatening shadow on his path; a baleful influence pursued, and at last overtook him: like the plague, it came when least expected. When the crafty Gupini had assured Auber, years before, of the death of Lucia, he had deceived him. Finding the custody of Lucia harassing, and that the gloom of her presence darkened his careless jollity, the valet had let her go, and swore to having ascertained her death. The deceit was however exposed: at a time when Auber's strength was prostrated by illness, she returned, and ever afterwards clung with leech-like tenacity to her prey. Auber never could succeed in throwing off that Italian mistress; he evaded her again and again; but she still followed him. At night those faded, yet gleaming eyes, with dark rings around them, fell on his each time he opened them: and the sick man turned, shuddering, from them. Her watchfulness was like that of a jailor; her care and tenderness those of a spy. Often in his dreams would he see a glassy Highland loch, fringed by green weeping birches, and enamelled with water-lilies, and breathe

the heather-scented air, while looking upon a fair sweet face and bright blue eyes that gazed with innocent frankness upon him; but ere he could enjoy the purity, freshness, youthful health, and artless love, he awoke with a start to a hated reality. Life had become wearisome, companionship distasteful. Had Lady Ida Marchmoram accompanied her husband in any of his visits to his friend Auber, a fearful welcome might have awaited her: she would likely have encountered in Lucia her quondam companion and friend, the gipsy, Bella Norris.

Glenbenrough had erected an obelisk of white marble at the base of the Roua Pass, in commemoration of his daughter's escape. It pointed to the closed-up, gray old house, and through the tender green sprigs of the budding birches, the snow-white marble gleamed coldly; save when the slant rays of the sun at morning or evening lighted it up with golden glow, or shadows from the hill fell purpling o'er it. Glenbenrough had long delayed returning to his home, on account of a protracted paleness and languor which affected Esmé, and was attributed to the shock of her severe accident; but there was one who, during all this time, almost daily revisited the deserted house. On moonlight nights in summer, and in the fierce blasts of winter, the figure of Florh, wrapped in her shepherd's tartan plaid, might have been seen toiling up the ascent, with bowed head and lagging step. She would oft-times stand, with outstretched arms, her gray, gleaming eyes seeking restlessly over the quiet house and silent landscape, and cry aloud,—

“Ewen left his mother and his country for aye; but, oh! ere my days are spent, return, my iither dearer bairns—return, return!”

Poor Florh clung with the force of her strong nature to the ties and hope still left. The foster-mother's love was sufficient; though all maternal ambition was extinct, and her schemes had all been baffled: but even to her the time of consolation came at last.

It was in the autumn that Glenbenrough and his daughters returned home, after a visit to Norah's happy English home, whither they had gone purposely to welcome a little Yorkshire

grandson. Esmé now appeared quite restored to her pristine health, bloom, and strength. The shadow that had overcast her youthful spirit was but transient, and the returning sunshine appeared the more beautiful in its serenity; for out of this fiery trial of her passions, Esmé had come forth purified and strengthened. Calmly she now looked back upon her intercourse with Marchmoram as to a dream of fleeting and fallacious delight. She had awakened now: she saw clearly, and returned to the fresh life and quiet sunshine of home-happiness with renovated feelings, and a mind instructed by experience. Her accustomed duties were again revived; former habits and the old associations again held sway. Nor was it strange that one should be connected with them whose steadfastness had helped to support her, and with whom a sympathy had ever existed, even when striven against. In seeking to obliterate all traces of her misplaced passion, the manly virtues exemplified in Normal had always presented themselves to her mind: she could not think of the past without associations of him; and always in contrast with those she would banish,—painful, yet pleasurable too. His early unwavering love, so true and deep, yet to the last unavowed; and that noblest point of unselfishness which the letter evidenced, had come, heralding, as it were, the desertion of Marchmoram. If Normal were to return, she would show him that she had learned to prize his regard, and they would ever be friends again. And how was it with Normal? Time had been working well for him too. His first feelings, on hearing of Marchmoram's marriage and Esmé's consequent freedom, had been wild joy and a craving to return home; but those passed and graver thoughts succeeded. Why Marchmoram had not married Esmé, he did not then know; but he felt that, when he had left, in jealous dread of that result, he had been himself unworthy of her. He looked back upon his days of boyish sullenness and reserve and churlish pride; he reflected how narrow had been his views, and how untried and ill-disciplined he was. If ever he returned, it must be as a man, and with different ideas and feelings; and under the influence of revived hopes of gaining Esmé's affections, the finer qualities of his nature developed themselves and broke through the crust of hardness and reserve. It was one sultry evening in the autumn that Esmé strolled to her spring. She had found that, during her absence, the cranberry branches had trailed over the ledge and shadowed the water, so that it was

necessary to prune them ; and when she had done so, she still continued kneeling there, singing quietly that little Gaelic water song, "Foam, foam, foam, Essain."

Presently she stopped and sighed. What was it that sent a flush, deep as the red cranberry, mantling her cheeks and brow, as, the next instant, startled, she looked upwards ? It was an echo of the refrain—a sigh breathed back. There, beside the holly tree, with tearful eyes lovingly, earnestly fixed upon her, stood Normal : his face, though sun-burnt, had paled with emotion, and his hazel eyes looked darker than when last they had met. He stood, seemingly waiting to know what kind of greeting awaited him ; as if he feared to have his warm feelings chilled by a cold reception. After a momentary pause, Esmé bounded forward to meet him, extending her hands, with a cordial smile and an exclamation of delight.

"Oh ! Normal, Normal ! dear Normal !"

And as he caught her in his arms, he replied,

"Oh ! Esmé darling, what a welcome is this !"

It was some time later when Esmé and Normal sought the house, where he received the surprise and joyous greetings of Glenbenrough and Ishbel. The early harvest moon had eclipsed the fading glories of sunset ere they had thought of returning. They rested in a little grassy nook near the spring, shut in with holly and honeysuckle, whence the view embraced the bends of the river for miles ; and there they sat a long time together, enjoying pleasant communion as in past innocent days. And as Normal told of his long sojourn abroad, and Esmé questioned him on his weary illness, he held her hand in his, and she did not withdraw it. Now again there were very happy days at Glenbenrough ; and the intercourse of Normal there was uninterrupted. Ishbel declared him improved in mind and manner and in personal beauty : she said he surpassed, in manliness and intelligence, any Highlander or Englishman she ever had known (Harold perhaps excepted, whom she most admired and loved). And Esmé silently thought how much improved he was : he looked matured and thoughtful. Though grave, there was a gentle, earnest lovingness about him ; and he had become sensible and intellectual, as he had formerly been only brave and moody. Esmé noted that he kept a quiet, careful watch over her : he seemed to study her every wish, and at the same time he showed a guiding firmness that precluded any weak indulgence of idle fancies. Normal's character always had been strong ; but it

was now a truly fine one. Experience of life, the active exertion of travel, and contact with men, had drawn forth and ripened all the good hidden seed of his moral nature, while they expanded his intellectual powers. His companionship was delightful to Esmé. With heart and hand they pursued together the healthy occupations of Highland life; and with heart and mind they at last sympathized with each other. The lessons of the past had corrected the faults of both; their trials had refined, expanded, and elevated two sterling and generous natures, as trials ennoble all such; and in the genial warmth of revived sympathies and re-kindled feelings of affection, the germs of all good qualities in each unfolded and sprung up, fructifying, in due time, in virtuous and happy lives. What need to record the union of Esmé and Normal? Suffice it to say, that Florh lived to see a happy group before the house at Glenbenrough: a tall old man but slightly bent, the glance of his blue eye bright and genial as ever; a stalwart, handsome young man in his native Highland garb; a strong-built, stately Englishman, with two fair women close to them, and a dark-eyed, bright-faced girl seated beneath; all enjoying the summer evening, and listening to the singing of the birds and the sweet ringing voices of little Norahs and Esmés, disporting within sight of the heathery Roua Pass. Esmé and Normal, Norah and Harold, were happy in their marriages, as only in that state men and women can be who are united with congenial natures by the loving ties that bind. And Ishbel, grown tall and womanly, would probably some day make a like happy choice. Miss Christy would stop in her gaunt gambols with the children, to breathlessly exclaim,

“Hech, hech, Miss Ishbel! ye must mak’ haste, afore I’ll be too stiff to rampage wi’ ye’re bonny bairns!”

During the life of Glenbenrough, Esmé and Normal lived in the old home with him; and, at his death, he bequeathed the property to Normal, who, he thought, being a Highlander, would best carry out the customs of olden times, and sustain the character of the chieftain. This was true: but Normal’s son might not, perhaps, sustain it any better than Harold’s would; for the march of modern improvement advances fast in the Highlands. Wheat is uprooting the heather. There are *Highland lairds* who speak with foreign accents, now-a-days;

and native-born Highland ladies who know not the names of the surrounding hills, and never attempt the climbing of them. Year by year the Highlanders are becoming more civilized, and more rapidly approaching to an equality, in manners, education and habits of life, with the rest of the world. Even since this story was begun, have a few more of the remaining links in the good old-fashioned chain of custom snapped asunder and fallen aside; but silken bands of suavity, entwined by graceful hands, will serve to bind strong arms and brave hearts, when the aim of each one is the common good of all. Time-honoured usages are dear to us for their associations with the past; and all that is good in their spirit may be revived, with fresh vigour and activity, in the improvements of an altered state of society. Nature can never lose its charms for those who delight to study them. And to such I may say that the only matter-of-fact truth in this book is the scenery: I have visited every hill and glen, each loch and stream, herein described.

THE END



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